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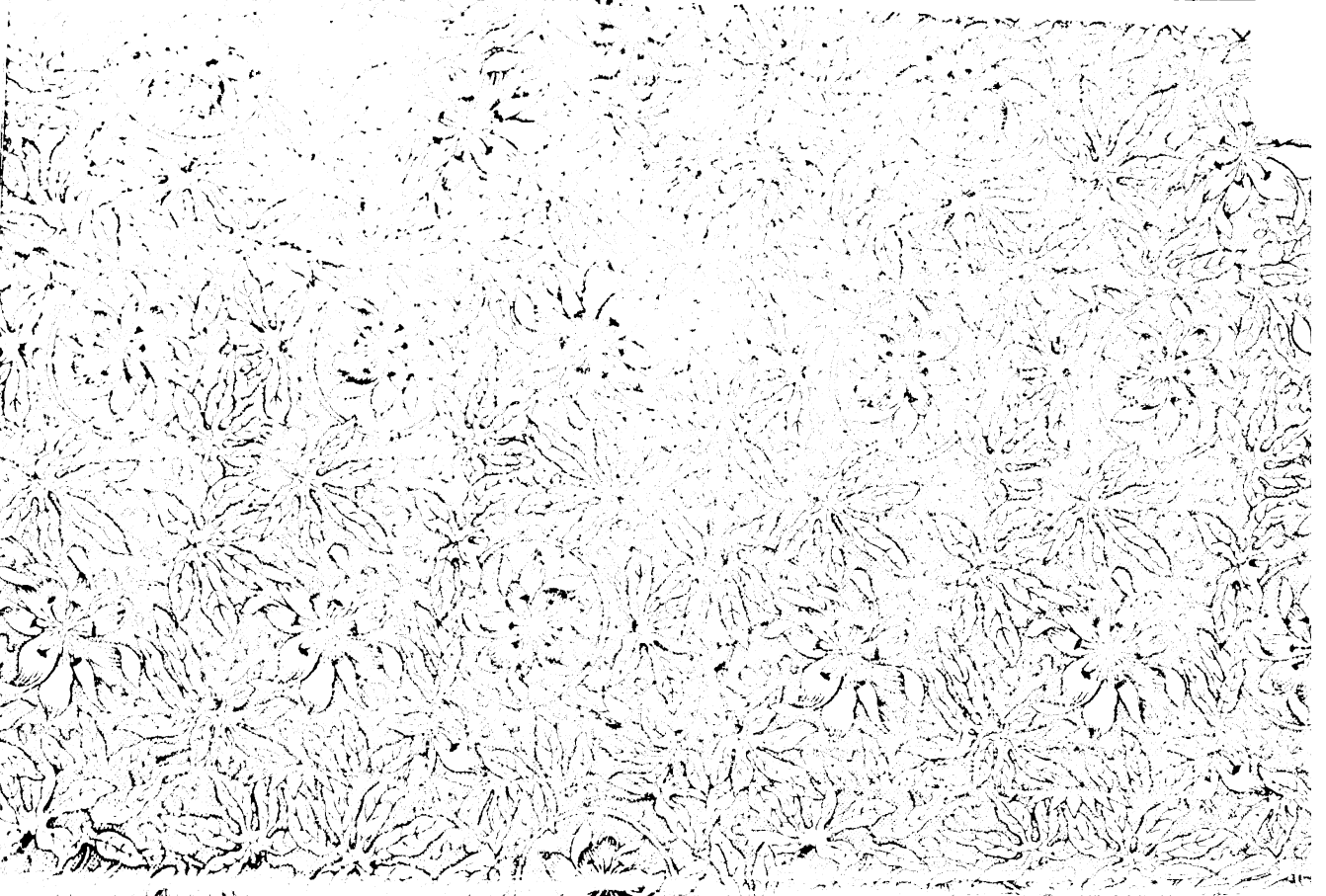
The Next Door House

By Mrs Molesworth



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MAKING FRIENDS.

PAGE 112.

THE NEXT-DOOR HOUSE

BY

MRS MOLESWORTH

AUTHOR OF

'CARROTS;' 'ROBIN REDBREAST;' 'THE BEWITCHED LAMP;' ETC.

W. & R. CHAMBERS, LIMITED
LONDON AND EDINBURGH
1893

Edinburgh:
Printed by W. & R. Chambers, Limited.

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THE NEXT-DOOR HOUSE.

CHAPTER I.

WATCHING AND WAITING.

WILLIE PEEBLES stood at his nursery window looking out. He spent a good deal of his time in this way, though he was nine years old—indeed within three or four months of his tenth birthday—and might, one would naturally think, have found some more profitable and interesting occupation. But he had got into the way of it during a long illness, when his couch had been moved close to this same window, and the greatest pleasure of his day, except one, had been the hour or two he had been able to spend in a kind of intercourse

with the outside world; for many a nod and smile were sent up to him from the passers-by in the street below. Most of the inhabitants of Market-St-Cross knew the boy by sight, all, nearly, knew him by name; for his father, Dr Peebles, was the head doctor of the little town, and there were circumstances connected with Willie which made him rather interesting.

He was an only child and motherless, and the very apple of his father's eye; and Dr Peebles was very much liked and even more respected at Market-St-Cross. With the generality of people the liking came first, and the respect deepened and increased, while in some ways the liking stayed pretty much where it had been; for Dr Peebles had a charm of manner about him which he could no more have thrown off than he could have altered the colour of his eyes; but this was only a sort of universal sunshine, though perfectly sincere so far as it went. Below this came the strong determined character, which some who got as far as that and no

farther called 'hard;' and below that again—qualities which a few, only a few, really knew—an intense tenderness, a great faithful power of affection, an unconscious unselfishness such as can be more truly felt than talked about. Willie knew them, in his way; but even Willie sometimes stopped short, and was frightened of his father, though deep down—quite deep down—in that part of us which we sometimes speak of as 'soul,' because 'heart' hardly seems strong enough, I think the two were truly at one.

Nine past seems old to be living still in a 'nursery.' But the word had clung to the pleasant bright old room which Dr Peebles had given up to Willie's use when, nearly four years ago now, it had become evident that the illness which had seized the boy was not a light or passing one. Incessant watchfulness and care had pulled him through the first great danger, and, more than that, had prevented his becoming an invalid for life.

For Willie was now *almost* as well and strong

as most boys of his age, and school was becoming a not distant prospect. Wonderful to say, he was not the least of a spoilt child, for his father was wise as well as skilful; he had never allowed Willie to suspect how intense was his anxiety; through all, he had managed to make and keep the boy unselfish and self-forgetting.

Still there were some things in such a life difficult to avoid. Willie had scarcely any friends of his own age. The rather rough boys who were day scholars at the grammar-school would have felt quite out of their element in the little fellow's quiet room, and, though some kind-hearted mammas had sent their little girls to see him now and then, the visits had not somehow been a success; for Willie was a thoroughly manly boy—he did not like to be either pitied or petted, and the little Selby girls and others thought pitying and petting the proper thing under the circumstances.

So the ice had never been really broken, and, though Willie was most attentive and hospitable

to his guests, I don't think either he or they felt sorry when the tea-party came to an end.

Nevertheless, as I said, Willie was the object of a good deal of interest and attention among the inhabitants of the old town—of some gossip, too, I am afraid. There were people who declared that his father spoilt him terribly, a few even who dared to say that he was neglected; these last were to be found among some, perhaps well-meaning busybodies, whom Dr Peebles had kept at a distance.

And even in peaceful, sleepy Market-St-Cross human nature was, as it is everywhere, a strange mixture of good and bad. There was a great deal of kindness, but also some real ill nature, in the society of the little place.

The doctor's house was of the regular old country-town pattern. The front door opened straight on to the pavement; the garden, a large and pleasant one, was at the back.

Willie's nursery faced the street; his bedroom, which opened out of it, looked on to the garden.

So that, while he was really ill, and sometimes unable to bear the noise of passing-by wheels and even footsteps, his couch used to be moved to the quiet window of his bedroom; it was a large bay-window, with a good view of the garden next door as well as of his own.

But it was not very often, even long ago, that Willie deserted the street window, and it was there he was standing when we first make his acquaintance.

Something of unusual interest was going on. The house next door, which, for as long as any one at Market-St-Cross could remember, had been known as 'Mr Rotherby's,' had been empty for fully two years; for Mr Rotherby's sons were in India, and Mr Rotherby himself, the much-respected lawyer, had gone on a longer journey still. He died just when Willie was beginning to get better.

But to-day for the first time there were signs of life about, which interested the boy greatly, especially as it had been raining, and he was

not yet counted strong enough to play in the garden unless it was quite dry.

'I do believe,' he said to Mr Thring, his daily tutor, as he was putting away his lesson-books for the day—Mr Thring only came in the mornings—'I do believe somebody's coming to live at Mr Rotherby's.'

'Indeed,' said Mr Thring, though without showing much interest in the announcement.

He was rather a silent young man, and rather stricter in some ways than Dr Peebles quite liked, but tutors in small towns are not as plentiful as blackberries on the hedges, and on the whole he did very well.

'Yes,' Willie went on, his face quite flushed with excitement, for he had just caught sight, on his way to the book-shelves, of another railway van. 'That's the second this morning!'

'The second what?' said the tutor indifferently. 'Be sure,' he went on, without waiting for an answer, 'to get that declension thoroughly by heart for to-morrow.'

'Yes, sir,' he replied, in answer to his tutor's last words, deciding in his own mind that it was no use speaking to *him* about anything except lessons. 'I'll see if Betsy knows anything about it, when she brings up my dinner,' he resolved.

And he spent the next half-hour very much to his satisfaction in watching the unloading of the van in question, till Betsy and dinner made their welcome appearance.

'Betsy,' he said, 'do you know what is happening next door? There have been carts coming all the morning.'

Betsy was a rather stolid girl, though good-natured and obliging. She attended on Willie under the direction of old Mrs Groomridge, the doctor's housekeeper; but even her stolidness was not proof against anything so interesting as newcomers to Mr Rotherby's house.

She set down the tray and joined the boy at the window.

'It was done up,' she said, 'when you were

away at your uncle's last month, you know, Master Willie. Not so very much; the painters were only in a fortnight, but then Mr Rotherby kept it beautiful, and he'd had it all done fresh just a month or two before he was took ill.

'But what has that to do with new people coming?' said the boy. 'I don't care whether it's beautiful or not. I want to know if any one's coming to live there.'

'I was just a-going to tell you,' said Betsy in her slow way. 'The baker's boy said as the painters had told him the house was being put in order to let, so now, as there's furniture coming in, it stands to reason that it's took.'

'But who's taken it?' said Willie impatiently. 'That's what I want to know.'

'That I can't tell you,' said the girl, returning to the table as she spoke, and proceeding to lay the cloth for Willie's dinner.

He gave an exclamation of impatience.

'How stupid she is!' he said to himself. 'I

wonder if Mrs Groomridge knows, or Phœbe' —Phœbe was the housemaid—'or Bennett.'

But, though Willie had the house to himself for the greater part of the day, he was under strict discipline, and would no more have thought of running down to the kitchen or pantry, unless expressly sent for, than if he had belonged to a family of children constantly under the eye of a mother or governess.

'I'd better wait and ask papa, I suppose,' he decided, as he ate his solitary meal. 'He won't be in till late, so I shan't see him till his dinner-time. I hope the vans won't have left off coming before I've learned that horrid grammar. If I don't do it soon I shall forget what Mr Thring explained.'

So the early part of the afternoon was dutifully spent over his Latin books, and then, with a clear conscience, Willie felt he might devote himself to the pleasant occupation of watching the unloading going on in the street.

To his great delight the bustle had not

calmed down, but was rather on the increase; indeed, the van or two he had noticed early in the morning had been only the first-comers, for they were followed by two much larger ones—'as big as little houses,' said Willie to himself, admiringly. And he wished he dared run down into the street to peep inside one of them.

He wouldn't have seen much if he had, they were so closely packed. It took some hours to get everything out, and at last even Willie grew tired of watching and wondering what the queer-shaped things could be that the men so carefully lifted out one after the other.

'There must be a good many people coming to live there,' he thought, 'to need such great lots of furniture,' for he had never seen anything like a 'removal' before.

It was only the end of February, so the evenings were not long, and it grew dusk before the last van had moved away—too dark for Willie to look out any more.

With a little sigh, he came away from the window, and stood by the fire, for he was feeling chilly. Just then Betsy made her appearance again. She drew the curtains and lighted the candles.

'Is it nearly tea-time?' asked Willie.

'Yes, sir,' said the girl. 'It's half-past four.'

'Then why don't you bring it?'

Willie was not on much ceremony with Betsy, and he was feeling dull and rather tired: tea would be a distraction.

But a pleasant surprise was awaiting him.

'Mrs Groomridge said as it wasn't to be brought up here to-day, Master Willie. Carter has just brought in a message from your papa to say that he must have some dinner at five o'clock, as he has to go out again afterwards, and he wished you to have your tea at the same time in the dining-room.'

Willie gave a bound of delight.

'Oh, I say, how jolly!' he exclaimed. 'Fetch me a little hot water, there's a good Betsy;

my hands are so cold, and I must give them an extra good scrubbing for tea in the dining-room. And I'd better change this old suit, don't you think?'

Betsy looked doubtfully at the rather well-worn sailor jacket and knickerbockers.

'Mrs Groomridge didn't say nothing about it,' she replied at last, 'but your papa likes to see you tidy, and so he should. I'll get out your second-best velveteen in half a minute, Master Willie.'

'Thank you,' said Willie, hastening into the other room, when he tugged his 'top,' as he called it, up over his head till it stuck on his nose, as sailors' jackets or shirts—I am never sure which to call them—are rather apt to do if pulled off in a hurry. Then came a muffled shout for Betsy's assistance, which was readily given, and between them Willie's toilette was successfully accomplished within ten minutes of the time named for Dr Peebles's coming in.

But doctors, as everybody knows, cannot be

blamed for not being punctual. Many a 'waiting for papa' had Willie known in his short life, and he was therefore not much surprised, though increasingly hungry, when five, then ten, then twenty minutes, went by without the sound of the front door opening, or the cheery voice calling out—'Well, my boy, tired of waiting, eh?'

He wandered backwards and forwards between the dining-room and the quaint square hall, where a bright fire was burning, now and then even venturing to open the front door and peep out to see if the dogcart was coming down the street, or Dr Peebles himself on foot, in view perhaps, as he was sometimes to be seen if his last visits had been near home. The lamps were lighted outside, and, though there were few vehicles passing, there seemed a good many people standing about on the pavement, and more talking and bustle than usual.

'You'll be here first thing in the morning,' said one man to another; 'we'll need all our

WELCOMED.

time if the place is to be anyways ready by the end of the week.'

And suddenly Willie remembered the house next door, which for the moment he had forgotten.

'Oh, I do wish papa would come in! He is sure to know about it,' he thought.

Another journey to the dining-room only served to increase his impatience.

'Everything will be getting cold,' he said to himself, 'or at least spoilt or something. And the table does look *so* cosy.'

But at last—he had scarcely time to rush towards the door before he heard the well-known voice.

'Poor old fellow,' said his father fondly, half-lifting the boy in his arms as he kissed him; 'I've been blaming myself for that unfortunate message telling you to wait for me. You must be half-starving.'

'Oh no, papa,' Willie replied, laying his dark close-cropped head confidingly on the doctor's

shoulder, 'I didn't mind that a bit. I was only beginning to be *so* afraid that perhaps you weren't coming. And I've such a lot of things to say to you.'

Dr Peebles looked pleased. He loved to feel that he had the boy's entire confidence.

'All right,' he said; 'but first we had better have something to eat, don't you think?'

'It isn't *quite* all on the table,' said Willie; 'I think there's cutlets or something keeping hot for you. But I'll ring and have it all ready by the time you've taken off your top-coat and washed your hands. Doesn't it look cosy?' he went on, five minutes later, when Dr Peebles reappeared at the dining-room door.

'Yes, indeed,' agreed his father, standing for a moment or two in front of the fire, and surveying the neatly-laid table and the eager little figure at one end. And if a sigh escaped him as in imagination he saw—what, indeed, was never long absent from the eye of his mind—another figure, another face, not unlike

Willie's own, though full of girlish grace and health and brightness, there where the boy was sitting, the sigh was concealed from the child, and even if Willie had heard it he would not have understood. 'Mamma' was an unknown word to Willie: he knew he had had a mother, and that she had died long, long ago—that was all. For one thing which Dr Peebles had never, with all his strength and resolution, been able to do was to talk of that dead young mother to the son who had never known her.

'If he could have remembered her, ever so vaguely, it would have been different,' he used to say to himself as a sort of excuse, 'but as it is, I can't do it. I must wait till he is older, till he is grown up perhaps, and has learned to care for some one as *I* cared—then he might understand.'

It was a mistake, I think. Nothing would have drawn the child so closely to his father as some sympathy, even though but a glimmering, in the sorrow of his life—nothing could have better

made him understand that 'papa' was not only the great, good, wise, kind being he believed him, but even more than that—a man who had suffered and sorrowed, who knew what it was to be lonely. Nothing would have better prevented Willie's being 'afraid' of his father than knowing something of the innermost part of his heart.

And this fear of himself Dr Peebles was aware of, and most earnestly anxious to prevent its growing into any real danger for the sensitive motherless boy.

CHAPTER II.

WILLIE'S HOPES ARE DAMPED.

'WELL,' said Willie's father after 'the eating something first,' which, more for the child's sake than his own, he had advised—'well, what are the lots of things you want to talk about? Any difficulties with Mr Thring, eh?'

'N—no,' Willie replied, with some hesitation, however, as his conscientious little mind retraced the events of the morning's lesson-hours, 'no, I don't think so exactly. But—Latin's dreadfully difficult, papa, and I don't believe Mr Thring cares for anything else. Do you think he was just like that when he was a little boy, papa?'

'Like what?' asked his father, smiling.

'Oh! always thinking of lessons and grammar and horrid dull things. Are all clever people

like that when they are little, papa? Were you?'

Dr Peebles smiled again, but the smile was succeeded by a sigh.

'I don't think I am one of the clever people in Mr Thring's sense,' he replied, 'and I'm afraid I didn't love Latin overmuch when I was a boy. But everything was very different with me; I had any quantity of noisy, merry brothers and sisters to distract my attention.'

'And where are they all now?'

'You know one or two of them,' his father replied, 'Uncle Tom and poor Aunt Sydney. Then there are three in Australia—two uncles and another aunt—whom you've never seen.'

'And the rest?' said Willie. 'That's only five! You said "any quantity," papa.'

'The rest are dead,' said his father quickly. 'Three died quite young; the sweetest and dearest of my sisters was one of them. And as for those in Australia, the separation is so great that I scarcely seem to know them.'

Willie, who had left his own place by this time, and drawn a chair close to his father's, stared up in his face with thoughtful eyes.

'Still, papa,' he said, 'it must be nice to remember them all when you were little; it must be better than not to have them to think of.'

'Yes,' said Dr Peebles, 'I daresay that's the best way to look at it.'

Just then he was very near—nearer perhaps than he had ever been before—to speaking to his little son of the mother Willie had never known. He opened his lips to do so, but hesitated; the consciousness of the boy's earnest gaze somehow made it more difficult.

He leaned back in his chair.

'All this time, Willie,' he said, 'we have not got to your "lots of things!" I'm not in a hurry; I'm not going out again till seven.'

Willie's face settled down to an expression of great satisfaction.

'I'm so glad you're not in a hurry, papa.

What I want to know is, *have* you heard about Mr Rotherby's house?'

'What's happened?' said his father, pretending to start. 'Has it been burnt down? I think I saw it as usual when I went out this afternoon!'

'Oh, papa!' said Willie, half-laughing and yet a little provoked. '*Do* be in earnest. No, it wasn't just as usual this afternoon, and that shows you didn't look at it. There were *hundreds* of vans at the door, as big as houses, filled with furniture, and men carrying it in.

'Dear me!' was the reply, in a grave voice. 'I wonder I got out at all. The whole street, the whole town, indeed, must have been blocked.'

'*Papa!*' said Willie remonstratingly, 'you're not in earnest yet. Of course, I didn't really mean hundreds—though some of them *were* as big as cottages, any way—two I think—and Betsy said the house was "took;" she does talk such bad grammar.'

Dr Peebles turned to Willie quickly.

'Betsy could know nothing about it,' he said.

'Much better ask me anything you want to know. The best of servants will gossip'—added he, half to himself. 'Yes,' he went on, 'I believe new tenants are coming to Mr Rotherby's house.'

'Great lots?' inquired Willie. 'You should have seen the furniture!'

'No, quite a small family, only a lady and her two daughters.'

'Oh!' said Willie, in a tone of deep disappointment. 'I was hoping p'raps there'd be children—boys like me: I don't care for ladies. There'd be no fun looking at *them* in the garden.'

'You're not very gallant,' said his father, laughing. 'Would little girls be more to your taste?' he went on unguardedly, but then he checked himself. 'After all, I scarcely think that it will much matter to you what our new neighbours are, except so far as it amuses you to watch them out of the window.'

'If they're little girls,' said Willie dubiously, 'I don't think I'd care for them much more than for big ladies. The only little girls I have ever

liked have been in story-books. But you may as well tell me all you know about them, papa, and then I'll know their names, if they're nice to watch when they're playing. Are they coming soon? And are you going to be their doctor if they get ill?'

Dr Peebles found himself in for telling more than he intended.

'But, after all,' he reflected, 'as Willie is already so interested in their chairs and tables, he would have been sure to notice them themselves as soon as they arrived. Perhaps I had best explain things a little.'—'Yes,' he said aloud, 'they are coming next week, and I *am* going to be their doctor; that is how I know anything about them. For, I am sorry to say, the poor lady herself is ill already—that is, she is only now recovering from a bad illness.'

Willie looked very sympathising.

'Like me,' he said. 'Go on, please, papa.'

'She has to be kept very quiet, and no doubt it must be rather dull for her children. They are

girls, as I said, two of them—one older than you, the other about your age.'

'I don't mind playing with them, even if they are girls,' said Willie, with some little effort, 'and I can lend them some of my books and games. There are a good many I don't care for now, but I daresay girls would like them.'

'I don't think it's at all probable that you will know anything of them, unless you find it amusing to watch them out of the window, as I said,' Dr Peebles replied. 'I want you to understand,' he went on rather gravely, 'that they are not *friends* of ours, like the Selbys and the Randalls, for instance. My being their doctor is quite a different thing; and you see, Willie, I am particularly anxious that you should never get into the way of talking about other people to the servants, or to any one, indeed. When you are grown up, if you are a doctor yourself, you will learn that in no house must gossip be so discouraged; it might do great mischief.'

Willie did not clearly take in what his father

meant. Indeed, Dr Peebles for the moment half forgot how young the boy was, but the serious way in which he spoke overawed Willie slightly, and prevented his asking for further explanation. He only answered one part of his father's speech.

'I don't want to be a doctor, not in the very, very least,' he said.

His father glanced at him.

'Flattering to the profession,' he observed, with a half-smile; but Willie did not hear the remark, nor would he have understood it.

'And,' the boy went on, 'I am very glad not to know the little girls. I shall like them best just out of the window.'

'All the better, then,' Dr Peebles replied, 'but you quite understand what I have been saying, Willie?'

'Yes,' replied the boy dreamily, never doubting that he spoke the truth, though, in point of fact, his thoughts were far away.

He was really a good deal disappointed at the overthrow of all the castles in the air he had been

building about the newcomers next door, and, in spite of what he had said, at the bottom of his heart this disappointment had been added to by his father's words.

All he had left to fall back upon was curiosity, of which, in his queer imaginative way, he possessed a good deal. At the moment he answered his father he was really picturing to himself the expected neighbours such as he fancied he was to see them.

'I wonder if they'll walk up and down the paths with their dolls, like Rhoda Selby?' thought he. 'Perhaps they'll have a dog; there would be some fun in that, but girls never care for sensible things, I don't believe.'

His father's voice called him back to the present.

'I must go now, I'm afraid, my boy,' it said. 'I have something to see to in the surgery before I start again. What are you going to do with yourself till bedtime? Any lessons to learn?'

'Oh no, they're all done,' said Willie virtuously. 'But, oh, papa, if you're going to the surgery, do let me come with you for a little. I'll be as quiet as anything, and you know I never go there without leave, but I do so love to see Dickens measuring out the powders and things with those ducky little spoons and weights.'

'And yet you don't want to be a doctor?' said his father.

'No, but I wouldn't mind being a chemist,' said Willie, in a tone of conviction.

'Come along, then,' said Dr Peebles, laughing, 'though I'm not at all sure but that Dickens has gone home.'

This did not prove to be the case, however; so the next half-hour or so was spent, greatly to Willie's taste, in watching the assistant at his dispensary work, and, as the child was unusually careful and methodical, he was even allowed to help a little. There was a small pestle and mortar, considered his especial property, in the

surgery, and his face of importance when he was established at a corner of the high table with this before him was an amusing study.

It was with a sigh that he looked up in obedience to his father's summons.

'Good-night, my boy. Jump down—that's right. Mrs Groomridge will be wondering what I've done with you. Tell her I shall be late to-night—perhaps very late—but, of course, no one must sit up for me.'

'Is there somebody very badly ill? Are you going to stay with them all night, papa?' inquired Willie, as the two made their way back to the private part of the house. He asked his question fearlessly, for his father never reproved him for showing interest of this kind.

'Perhaps so,' he replied. 'There is a poor man at Hamlet Lane who is very ill indeed, and he has a wife and several children. I don't know that I can do much for him, but if I am

there the poor mother will get a few hours' sleep.'

Willie looked deeply concerned.

'Papa dear,' he said, as his father stooped to kiss him, 'I think you are a *very* kind, good man.'

The simple words—for it was not very often that the little boy was quite so outspoken—sent Dr Peebles out into the cold dark evening with a warm feeling in his heart.

Mrs Groomridge, the old housekeeper—she seemed to Willie quite superhumanly aged, for 'fancy,' he used to say, 'she was once *papa's* nurse'—old Mrs Groomridge had kept up one custom unbrokenly since the boy's babyhood, when she had first come to take charge of the doctor's house and child—she always 'saw Willie to bed' herself.

'Poor lamb!' she said to her confidantes, and, to do her justice, these were few, 'it's not much I can do to make up for what he's never known. But at least he shall never be

able to remember going to sleep at night without his father's old nurse to hear him say his prayers and tuck him up, bless him.'

Willie liked his evening *tête-à-tête* with Mrs Groomridge. He knew his father did not at all class her with the rest of the servants, and he knew that she was almost as particular as the doctor himself in what she talked about. Still, he was much less afraid of her than of his father, and he could chatter unrestrainedly, though at any moment a gentle 'I don't think your papa would like us to talk about such silly things, Master Willie,' would check his remarks about the cross baker over the way, who was *said* to beat his wife, or his interest in Betsy-for-the-time's 'young man.' For Betsy was by no means a fixture; there had been a good many of her, for Mrs Groomridge was rather hard to please, and rather fond of remarks about the falling-off in young servants since *her* day, which Betsys do not always receive as respectfully as they should.

Mrs Groomridge never spoke to Willie of his mother, though this was only in obedience to the doctor's wishes, for she would have liked to do so. She had scarcely known her master's young wife, and for this reason Dr Peebles had said he would rather tell his son all about her himself, when he was old enough. In her heart the old housekeeper thought that time had come, and she would have loved to describe to Willie the sweet and pretty picture she had always kept in her memory of the girlish figure she had seen but once.

'Papa says Betsy knows nothing about the people who are coming next door, and he says I'm not to talk to her about them,' said the boy to his old friend.

'You'll know them for yourself, Master Willie, before long, I daresay,' said Mrs Groomridge.

'No,' said Willie, quite unaware that he was beginning to talk over things in any way his father would not like. 'That's just what I shan't do; we're not going to be friends with

them at all, but I don't care. They're only girls. I don't think it'll be even much fun watching them out of the window.'

The housekeeper felt surprised and a little disappointed, for she had had her hopes on Willie's behalf, in connection with the new-comers, but she thought it best to say nothing.

'I wish the doctor were not quite so proud in his ways,' thought she. 'As if they wouldn't be too pleased to make friends with Master Willie. I do think his father forgets what a different life the poor child has to most children. It's a good thing he doesn't feel it himself.'

'They're only girls, did you hear, Mrs Groomridge?' repeated the boy rather impatiently, showing that, in spite of his 'don't cares,' his mind was still running on the changes next door. 'Isn't it stupid? And they haven't even got a father—at least, I don't think so—only a mother that's always ill.'

'Master Willie, my dear,' said Mrs Groom-

ridge, rather startled by his tone, 'I've no doubt the young ladies love their mamma most dearly, ill or well.'

'I don't understand about mothers,' said Willie. 'I don't see how they can be as much good as fathers, any way. I just wish they'd been boys. Perhaps papa would have let me know them then. Good-night, nursie dear, I am so sleepy. Kiss me quick, please.'

The old housekeeper did so, as tenderly as usual, but she sighed as she left the room.

'If Miss Sydney even had not been such an invalid, she might have been here, and it would have been better for the boy,' she said to herself as she went down-stairs.

Dr Peebles, after all, was not kept so late as he had expected at Hamlet Lane, for a neighbour had come in and volunteered to take part of the night watching. The lights were still burning in his house when he drove back, and there was a good fire in his study. He noticed some hay and straw lying about the pavement in

front as he came in, and this reminded him of his conversation with Willie.

'How interested he would have been if I had told him that I was all over the house next door, yesterday!' thought he, as he stood for a moment or two before the fire, debating as to whether it was worth while to do anything more that night. He was tired, certainly, but that was not the question.

'I may as well write it, and get it off my mind,' he decided, as he sat down at the table and drew forward the inkstand. 'To-morrow is sure to bring a score of other things with it.'

But even when the paper was before him and the pen in his hand, he hesitated a little.

'MY DEAR ARTHUR (as you will have it so)—I have acted upon your instructions. I need scarcely say that, in spite of the years since we met, it has been a pleasure to me—and a great one—to be of even this little service to you, or those belonging to you. The house seems to

me now in very satisfactory condition. I can guarantee its being perfectly healthy, and I really think, under the circumstances, you could hardly have chosen anywhere better suited to Mrs Ross, independently altogether of the kind things you say as to your confidence in my professional care of her. She may live here as quietly for the time as in the most absolutely secluded spot, and yet not be without help at hand in any emergency. I will do my best for her; the London oculist has already written to me. I shall look forward to seeing you some months hence, when you return to England. —Yours ever sincerely, HUGH PEEBLES.'

This was the letter the doctor wrote, and put into an envelope, which he addressed and stamped, leaving it on his table to be posted the next morning.

'Poor old Arthur!' he said to himself as he glanced at it. 'How fond we were of each other! There are not many affections in life

stronger for the time than school-boy friendships. And, after all, it is scarcely fair to him to speak of it as a thing of the past. But, as far as Willie is concerned, it is better not to seem to expect any extending of the friendliness to him.

The name on the envelope was that of 'The Lord Clynes,' and it was addressed to a hotel in Rome.

CHAPTER III.

A 'SHOW PLACE.'

THE bustle next door gradually subsided —that is to say, no more vans arrived, and the preparations going on inside were, of course, hidden from Willie's eyes, though bumping and knocking, and even the voices of the workpeople, were to be heard plainly enough.

For some days he had left off hoping for anything more interesting than these same muffled sounds, when one morning, to his great delight, he descried from his bedroom window a gardener and his men hard at work. They were digging up the beds, carrying in fresh mould; most interesting of all, regravelling the paths.

'It *will* look nice,' thought Willie to himself, 'when it's all done, even though it wasn't very bad before. Mr Rotherby did keep it so neat,

and I've seen them lately weeding and mowing the grass. I do hope they won't root up any of his dear little plants by mistake.'

No fear of that; the gardener knew what he was about, and soon Willie noticed that especial care was being given to one little plot close under a long French window, only separated from the garden by a short flight of stone steps.

This window, or window-door, Willie could not see from his post above, but he knew it was there, as he had now and then been taken to pay a visit to their former neighbour.

'Papa,' he said that evening, when Dr Peebles came up to see him for a few minutes, 'don't you think it's fine enough now for me to play in the garden a little? I've only been walks for ever so long, for Mrs Groomridge always thinks it's too damp. I shan't have any flowers in my own garden this year unless I begin working at it.'

'If you really would work, so as to keep yourself warm, and not moon about, getting

chilled, I daresay you might stay in the garden for half an hour or so at a time, but you must have a walk too. I'll speak to Mrs Groomridge about it.'

'They're making the next-door garden quite beautiful,' Willie went on. 'Timmins and two of his men are working there.'

'Indeed!' said Dr Peebles; 'how interesting!'

He could not pretend to be very surprised, considering that he himself had given Timmins both his orders and directions; but something in his tone made the boy imagine that his father thought him silly for being so much taken up with the doings next door, and he said no more about it.

The following day was fine and mild, and, when his morning lessons were over, Willie was told he might go into the garden till dinner-time.

Timmins himself, Willie was glad to see, was still there, though his men had just gone home. He and Willie were old acquaintances.

Towards the farther end of the garden the high wall which divided the two plots of ground melted down to almost nothing—being replaced by shrubs and trees. For long, long ago, so ran the story, the two houses had been one large mansion, and the wall of division had only been carried so far as was really necessary.

The gardener happened to be at that end, and thither Willie directed his footsteps.

'Good-morning, Mr Timmins!' he called out. 'I saw you from the window: I suppose you've nearly finished?'

'Good-morning, sir,' Timmins replied. 'Glad to see you about again. Yes, this afternoon will see all tidied up. Time it was too, as the quality, I hear, is expected to arrive to-morrow.'

'The *what?*' said Willie, staring.

'The ladies, sir. The family as has taken the house. We've been doing our best to make it very nice close under the window there,' and he nodded towards the steps. 'I've put some bulbs in pots, that'll be up soon to look cheerful for the

poor lady, by the doctor's orders, as that's to be her sitting-room.'

'Do you mean papa?' said Willie, rather puzzled.

'Of course, sir, your papa's seen to everything.'

A queer feeling came over Willie.

'Papa might have told me about it,' he thought. 'I would have liked to know.'

But an instinct he could not have put in words prevented him letting the gardener see how little he knew.

'I'm afraid my garden will be very dull this year!' he said with a sigh.

'I'll step in and take a look at it,' said Timmins good-naturedly. 'I might find you a few things that it's not too late for, that would soon make a bit of a show.'

'Oh, thank you,' said Willie gratefully. 'You can get through the shrubs, can't you? Do come now, for I mayn't stay out long.'

The man good-naturedly did as he was asked, greatly cheering Willie by the promise of some

seeds and roots, and setting him to work to dig over his little garden at once, in preparation for them, so that the child was quite in a glow, and looking eager and happy, when he ran in to dinner, in answer to Mrs Groomridge's summons.

'Do you know?' he said to her, '*they* and those little girls are coming to-morrow, Timmins says.'

That was the only remark he made about it, and the housekeeper did not encourage him to say more.

Still, when Willie woke the next morning he had the feeling we all know of expecting something unusual to happen that day.

Mr Timmins had been as good as his word, and a little packet of seeds and roots had been left for 'Master Peebles' by one of his men, so Willie spent an hour most agreeably at work in his garden after his tutor had left. He found time to peep through the shrubs at the farther end more than once, to see what or if anything was happening at 'Mr Rotherby's,' as from old habit he still called it. But all seemed quiet, except

that a couple of maid-servants, with neat white caps and aprons, came out for a moment, and took a look round as if to see where they were. For they had arrived in a fly from the station early that morning, while Willie was busy with Mr Thring, so, of course, he had not seen them.

He went out for a walk with Betsy soon after his dinner. These walks were by no means to his taste, though he liked them better when Mrs Groomridge could find time to take him. Betsy was slow, and unobservant, and rather silent by nature, and, even if she had not been so, to-day especially, conversation would not have flourished between the two. For the expected arrival was the subject uppermost in the boy's mind, and he had understood clearly enough that his father did not wish him to speak of their neighbours to the servants.

But it was a bright mild day, with a feeling of spring about it. Willie's spirits rose as the sweet fresh air blew on to his face. For they had walked some little way out of the town towards

rising ground known as Ferney Edge, from which there was a pretty view of the country round about.

'Do you think the primroses will be out soon, Betsy?' said the boy. 'Shall we go home by Ferney Stroll to look if there are any?'

'My! Master Willie,' exclaimed Betsy, for once roused from her sleepiness, 'you forget, it's only to-morrow the fifth of March. There'll be no primroses for another month.'

'Yes,' he said, 'I did forget. It feels so much warmer to-day. The leaves'll begin to be coming out soon, though, if it keeps so mild.'

'We'll have it cold again, you'll see,' said the girl oracularly. 'It isn't in the nature of things for March to come in so mild.'

What 'the nature of things' meant Willie did not understand, but he knew that it was no use ever to ask Betsy to explain herself, so he said nothing—only repeating her words to himself softly, while he gazed before him.

'How pretty it must be in those woods over

there!' he said, pointing to some forest land a mile or two distant. 'That's—what's that place? I forget. Papa said he'd take me there some day.'

'Clynes Chase, Master Willie,' said Betsy. 'It's a very fine place indeed. Father's uncle was under-gardener there when he was young: that was in the last lord but one's time. There's a new one now—a younger gentleman, they say; but he's not been here to stay since he came into the property. My! Fancy having a beeyutiful castle like that, and not to live there!'

Betsy had grown quite excited for her. Her manner more than her words roused Willie's attention.

'P'r'aps he can't help it,' he replied. 'I *think*, but I'm not quite sure, that lords have to be always with the Queen in her palace. At least, it seems like that in my English history. I'll ask papa.'

'Then their castles and manshins should be

giv' over to folks as would use them, say I,' remarked Betsy, who, I fear, was not without Radical tendencies.

To this Willie had no answer ready.

'Are those white tips among the trees the house?' he inquired.

'Yes, sir,' said Betsy, growing communicative with the sense of her own superior knowledge. 'It's a show place—that's to say, certain days folks is allowed to see through it. I've been there twice—no, three times—myself.'

'*Have* you?' said Willie, opening his eyes, his respect for Betsy increasing. 'He must be a kind lord, I think—the one the castle belongs to—to let people see it all. I'll ask papa if I mayn't go some day,' he added to himself.

Then Betsy and he turned to go home.

As they got to the entrance of the town they met some ladies, the Misses Perfect by name—maiden ladies, no longer young, who were not special favourites of Willie's, even though they had tried their best to make a pet of him. They

were three sisters living in a very neat, but very plain little house. An orphan niece, a year or two older than Willie, shared their home. She was called Mabel, and I am afraid it is only telling the truth to say that Willie disliked this little girl very much—much more than the Selby children, whom, indeed, he did not dislike: he only found them very dull and uninteresting.

'Well, Willie, and how are you,' said Miss Grace Perfect, the second sister and the most talkative. —'Don't you see Willie, Mabel? Your great friend, Willie Peebles!'

Mabel put out a stiff hand in a thick woollen glove, and Willie shook it awkwardly, while he replied, 'Quite well, thank you,' to her aunt's inquiry.

'And how is your papa?' said Miss Maria Perfect, the youngest sister—a small, rather frightened-looking person, though it was said in Market-St-Cross that Miss Maria had the sharpest tongue of the three. Miss Perfect, the eldest,

AN UNLOOKED-FOR MEETING.

who was tall, and stout, and good-natured, was not present on this occasion.

'Quite well, thank you,' said Willie, for the second time.

'Ah, indeed, very pleased to hear it,' said Miss Grace. 'He must have been so *very* busy lately. So much winter illness about still, and all to see to for the next-door house!'

Willie stared. He looked stupid, and he really did feel puzzled. It was the second time something had been said to him about his father's having to do with the preparations for the newcomers, and yet, when he had talked about Mr Rotherby's house, and the furniture arriving, and what Betsy had told him, Dr Peebles had not said that he had had anything to do with it.

It gave Willie a feeling of mystery strange to him, so he just stared and did not speak.

'I suppose it's all quite in order now?' Miss Grace went on, in an inquiring tone.

Still Willie stared or 'gaped,' as Miss Maria described it afterwards.

'They've done the garden,' he blurted out at last, 'and—the servants have come, and *they* are coming to-day, he was on the point of adding, when it struck him this was the very thing his father had told him not to do. 'He said I wasn't to talk about next-door to the servants, or to other people,' he thought to himself, so he stopped short and said nothing.

'And—and—what were you going to say?' asked Miss Grace persuasively.

Willie grew very red.

'Nothing,' he said bluntly, and I fear it did sound rather rude. 'Good-bye, please. I'm going home.'

He went through the ceremony of shaking hands with all three again, as he thought himself bound to do, but without speaking.

Miss Grace pinched up her lips; Miss Maria exclaimed, 'Well, I declare!' and Mabel gave a little giggle.

'Did you ever see anything like it?' said Miss Grace: 'making a mystery about nothing whatever, just because some old lady has taken a house, and asked the doctor to see that it was in good order. For that's all about it, as far as I can see, and I did ask Jephson exactly what work his men had been doing there, when he came about the boiler leaking yesterday. The idea of that child refusing to answer, as if *we* would gossip about our neighbours' affairs.'

'I think he's half an imbecile,' said Miss Maria.

'Sh!' murmured Miss Grace, glancing towards Mabel, who had heard the remark, and rather enjoyed it, for she was not any fonder of Willie than he was of her.

'We shall not *call*,' said Miss Grace solemnly, after a little pause, as if she were pronouncing the fate of nations at least. 'You agree with me, Maria, do you not? Under the circumstances —no lady in his own house—it would have been

only natural if the doctor had bespoken our good offices, considering all we have done for him in time past—for these newcomers, if they are friends of his.'

'On the contrary,' said Miss Maria, 'I think we *should* call. Dr Peebles has not the control of our visiting-list. Of course, they are not gentlepeople: retired from commerce, I daresay, whom we could not be expected to notice, except out of good-nature.'

'Old Jane Matthews has been cleaning down there. She says the furniture's very grand indeed—gold and satin chairs, she said: just what common rich people would have,' said Mabel pertly.

Miss Grace gave a little sniff, and Miss Maria resolved to cross-question Jane herself on the first opportunity, though she said nothing.

'You must not get in the way of gossiping with charwomen, Mabel,' said Miss Grace. But the reproof was much less severe than one the child had received that very morning for walking

home a bit of the way from school with Emmy Hilton, the modest and well-behaved little daughter of a well-to-do farmer in the neighbourhood, which she had been told was 'vulgar and unlady-like.'

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WALL.

MRS GROOMRIDGE happened to be in the nursery when Willie came in from his walk that afternoon. Betsy had gone up-stairs to take off her bonnet.

'Have they come, Mrs Groomridge?' he asked eagerly.

The old housekeeper looked at him as if she did not understand.

'One, two, three—three good pairs, and—what do you say, my dear?' she asked. She was busy looking over Willie's stockings.

'Have they come—the little girls, you know, next door?' and he nodded his head towards the wall on Mr Rotherby's side.

'How should I know, Master Willie? I've been busy all the afternoon, and there's plenty of

wheels passing. But now I think of it, I believe they are not coming till late this evening. Your papa,' but here she stopped and went on with her counting again—'your papa told me to step round and ask if I could do anything to help about eight o'clock or so,' she was going to have said, had it not struck her that this would only add to the boy's curiosity, which it was evident the doctor did not wish to be encouraged.

'Papa said what?' persisted Willie.

'I didn't say he *said* anything, my dear. But he'll be late home for dinner to-day, and he will come up and see you in bed.'

'I daresay I'll be asleep,' Willie replied disconsolately, 'and I want to ask him a lot of things. If ever I try to keep awake I'm sure to fall asleep. Mayn't I sit up a little later to-night, nursie,' he went on coaxingly, 'till half-past eight?'

For one of the rules of Willie's invalid days was still in force. He woke very early in the morning, and at one time had slept very badly, so half-past seven was still his usual bedtime.

Mrs Groomridge shook her head.

'Not without your papa's leave,' she said; 'but now the evenings are getting longer I do think you might begin to sit up later. I'll ask about it. But not till he says you may, my dear.'

'I would so have liked to have seen them come. There'll be a lot of luggage, I daresay,' he went on, speaking half to himself. 'Do you think they'll come out to the garden to-night, nursie? *I* would; the garden's the first thing I'd want to see if we were going to a strange house.'

'But if it was dark you couldn't see it, my dear,' said the housekeeper in her matter-of-fact way, 'so there wouldn't be any sense in trying. And I'm sure it will be dark before the ladies get here. I daresay they're coming a long way.'

So Willie had to take his tea, and resign himself. After tea there was a lesson or two to look over, as he had been out so much; and then there was a puzzle he was trying to make out in a child's magazine, so that it was bedtime before he knew where he was. And nothing had happened

in the way of a fly or flies driving up next door! That he was sure of. It was very disappointing.

Still, things weren't so bad as they might have been. He was not asleep, only just in bed, indeed, when his father came up to see him. This was a *nice* surprise, which, if you have ever lived in a doctor's house, you will know sometimes happens to make amends, as it were, for the many waitings and disappointments doctors' belongings have to put up with. Willie loved his father's coming to see him when he was in bed. He never felt at all shy of him then, somehow. It reminded him of the times when he had been very ill, too ill to be shy or frightened of any one, and almost too ill to care for anything—the times when 'papa' had been so very, oh, so *very* kind, forcing himself to smile and look cheerful, though (which Willie little suspected) his heart was nearly breaking—times when papa had seemed the only thing to trust to at all, the only one who could do anything to make the terrible pain better, his

hands the only ones Willie could endure to touch him.

'I'm so glad I'm not asleep,' he said, with great satisfaction. 'Sit down, papa, won't you? I've a lot of things to ask you. I want to know something—do lords always have to live with the Queen in her palace?'

Dr Peebles repeated his words in surprise.

'What in the world has put such an idea in your head?' he went on. 'Who has been talking to you about "lords"?'

'It wasn't Betsy,' said Willie quickly. 'She didn't know. I thought it was in my history, but perhaps it isn't. Betsy only told me that that beautiful house, "Clynes Chase," belongs to a lord who never lives there, and I thought perhaps it was because he couldn't; but he must be a kind man, for he lets people go to see his house, and Betsy says it's splendid. May I go to see it some day, papa? You said once you'd take me to see the woods, but I didn't know about the house till Betsy told me.'

Dr Peebles did not answer at once. He looked grave, and he felt more annoyance than he showed. What an unfortunate coincidence that Willie's interest and curiosity about Clynes Chase should have been awakened just at this time!

'My dear boy,' he said. 'I do wish you would not talk to Betsy about things, or ask her questions. She is only an ignorant girl. I am always ready to tell you anything you want to know.'

'But I *am* asking you, papa,' said Willie, rather perplexed. 'That's why I stayed awake. Betsy didn't tell me much, and I haven't said a word to her about Mr Rotherby's house, since you told me not. But I must talk of something to Betsy when we're out for a walk.'

That was true, and Dr Peebles felt rather at a loss what to say in reply.

'And, oh, papa!' went on Willie suddenly, 'that reminds me—we met the Miss Perfects, and *they* asked me lots of things—at least, they were going to—about next door, but I just said the garden

was done up, and then I said "Good-bye," I had to go home.'

A gleam of amusement crossed Dr Peebles's face.

'That was quite right,' he said, 'though I hope you spoke politely. What did they ask you?'

'Oh, they said, hadn't you been dreadfully busy about it?—it wasn't exactly *asking*. Papa, you never told me you had had to settle about the house,' and there was a slight touch of rather timid reproach in Willie's voice.

'A very good thing I didn't,' his father replied. 'It left you able to say you didn't know, which would perhaps have been the best answer to give Miss Perfect. I often have things of that kind to see to for my patients, but, of course, they are not to be chattered about.'

'No,' said Willie, though not very heartily.

'I will drive you through the Clynes Woods some day, when the weather is warmer,' his father went on.

'And mayn't I see the house,' asked Willie.

His father did not at once reply.

'Perhaps you may some day or other, but if the owner comes to live there it may not be open to the public any more.' Then he hesitated. 'You have got some confusion in your head between the Queen's palace and the House of Lords,' he went on; and then he explained to Willie what he meant, and the child listened with interest.

'And,' added Dr Peebles, smiling a little, 'try and not follow Betsy's way of speaking of "lords."'

'What should I say?' asked Willie.

'"Lords," as you call them, have got names as well as other people,' said his father. 'You wouldn't speak of "Misters!" But now good-night, my boy, you must really get to sleep.'

Just at that moment there was heard along the now quiet street the sound of wheels, coming more slowly as they drew nearer, till they stopped seemingly in front of the house. The door between Willie's two rooms was wide open.

'Papa,' he said, starting up in great excite-

ment, 'do you hear? I do believe they've come!'

'Who? What are you talking about?' said Dr Peebles shortly.

'The ladies, the little girls, I mean, at Mr Rotherby's. Do let me get up and go to the nursery window to look out.'

'Nonsense, my dear boy,' said his father, 'you'd only catch a very bad cold, and it's the very thing I've been talking to you against—that silly way of being so taken up with one's neighbours. Good-night,' and he stooped to kiss the child and tuck him up.

Willie nevertheless felt a good deal snubbed—snubbed and puzzled too.

Whom was he to talk to? Not Betsy, and Mrs Groomridge always kept telling him to ask his papa.

'And papa himself tells me to ask him things, but I can see he only thinks me silly when I do. I suppose I'll just have to look at the little girls out of the window and not know anything about

them;' and, with a slight sigh, Willie turned over and settled himself to go to sleep.

He did not do so, however, till he had heard the wheels drive away again from next door, for his ears were quick; and when he did fall asleep it was only to dream of all sorts of wonderful things that were happening on the other side of the wall.

He was up betimes the next morning, and, as soon as he had finished his breakfast, at his post of observation at the bedroom window, thereby embarrassing Betsy in her processes of sweeping and dusting, and making the bed.

'I can't do with you, Master Willie,' she said at last. 'I'm sure it's much nicer in the other room, with a good fire.'

So Willie had to return rather dolefully to the nursery, where Mr Thring made his appearance ten minutes later; not that there had been anything to see from the back window; in fact, the new arrivals were fast asleep, tired out with their long journey of the day before,

and they slept on till Willie had said 'good-bye' to his Latin grammar for that day.

Shall we peep through the wall for once, and see what is happening there, just as Willie, with a sigh half of tiredness, half of satisfaction, has put away his last book, and establishes himself, for some time in vain, at his bedroom window? It was a fine day, and he might have been out in the garden; but, for his own reasons, he had made up his mind that he wanted in the first place to see his new neighbours without running any risk of being seen.

The little girls' bedroom matched Willie's large nursery, looking on to the street. There was a good deal of traffic early in the morning, but they had been accustomed of late to much noisier streets than any in Market-St-Cross, and besides this, they were very, very tired.

The sun had climbed as high as he could get in the March sky, and was beginning to think about coming down again, when a pair of sleepy

blue eyes opened at last, and a head of shaggy fair hair gave itself a little toss upon the pillow, as the owner looked round her with the strange bewilderment we all know the first morning in a strange place.

'Where am I?' thought little Beryl.

She was the younger of the two sisters—only just nine past, though she had seen a good deal in her short life, and change and travel were not as great a novelty to her as to most children. 'Where am I?' she repeated, and then by degrees it all came back to her mind: the long journey from Folkestone the day before, the anxiety lest poor mamma should be *too* tired, the arrival in the dark at the quaint old house in the little town, where all seemed so clean and fresh, and it was so nice to be met by Françoise, their French cook of many years' standing, and Christina, the Scotch housemaid, neither of whom they had seen for several weeks.

'I'm very glad to be settled again,' thought

Beryl. 'I'm tired of hotels and lodgings! We've not had a quite real house of our own since we were in South America—not our own furniture. I'm so glad to see some of the Spanish things, as well as the old English ones I can't remember.'

She sat up and looked about her a little.

'Yes,' she decided, 'this is a nice room; I think all this furniture must be new. I suppose it's what papa ordered when he was in London before he went to Japan. How I do wish he hadn't needed to go! And how I do wish mamma'——

She stopped; there came an interruption from the other little bed.

'Beryl,' said a voice, speaking low, 'are you awake? I'm afraid it's dreadfully late. I suppose Nesbitt thought it best to let us have "our sleep out" as Christina says.'

'I'm sure it's late,' said Beryl; 'for I'm so *dreadfully* hungry. What shall we do, Santa? Shall we ring the bell? It's so funny! Though

we're in our own house, I quite feel as if we were paying a visit; don't you?'

'I don't know,' said Santa slowly. 'I feel as if it had been selfish to sleep so long, without waking up to hear how poor mamma is. Yes, Beryl, you'd better ring the bell, I think, if you can find it. I shall change the way the furniture stands in this room, though it all looks very nice.'

Beryl by this time was out of bed, running about on her bare feet, in search of the bell. It was an old-fashioned one with a long pull to it, and for a minute or two she did not see it.

'Isn't it a sweet carpet, that bluey colour, with the little pink buds,' said she. 'It reminds me of—of—no I can't remember what it is.'

'I know,' said Santa. 'It's the curtains in mamma's boudoir at home, at Santa Ana, I mean. Of course it isn't home any more,' and she gave a little sigh.

'But we'll always remember it, and love it,

won't we?' said Beryl. 'I'm so glad you were called after it.'

'Yes,' said her sister, 'and to think that when I was a baby and we left it, papa and mamma had no idea they'd ever go back there again. It was funny, after being at the other side of the world for five years. But I don't know that it was any queerer than for us to be living here now—the last place in the world mamma expected to be at.'

'I think it's going to be a nice place to live at,' said Beryl cheerfully. 'I like the name—Market-St-Cross! "St" means the same as "Santa," I suppose.'

By this time she was perched at the foot of her sister's bed, in which Santa was still reclining rather majestically.

'You'd better go back to your own bed, Beryl,' she said. 'You will be catching cold. Where's your dressing-gown?'

'I couldn't find it,' said Beryl. 'You never can find things in a strange place. Shall I

ring again? Perhaps I didn't pull hard enough. Nesbitt generally comes so quick.'

But as she spoke there was a tap at the door, and Nesbitt, followed by Christina, came in. Each was carrying a little tray, on which breakfast was laid out.

'Oh, how nice!' said Beryl. 'I'm as hungry as anything.—How good of you to come too, Christina.'

'Françoise has had it ready keeping hot for you for ever so long, my lamb,' said the Scotchwoman. 'You'd never guess what o'clock it is. Half-past twelve! You've had a good sleep for once.—Are you well rested, Miss Santa?'

'Yes, thank you,' said Santa quietly, though Beryl had returned the old servant's greeting with a kiss. 'Can you tell me how mamma is this morning? That's what I want to know first of anything.'

'Mrs Fletcher says your mamma has had a pretty good night, and she's seeming better than might have been expected; but she's not

going to get up to-day at all, so, when you're dressed, she'll be glad to see you in her room, Miss Santa,' replied Christina.

Santa gave an impatient exclamation, and half sprang out of bed.

'You should have wakened me, Nesbitt,' she said in a tone of vexation. 'It does seem so selfish to have been sleeping here all these hours, and mamma perhaps wanting me ever so long.'

'Come now, Miss Santa,' said Nesbitt. 'There's no need for you to worry. Your mamma is having her breakfast quite comfortably, and the best thing you can do is to take yours, and go to see her when you're dressed.'

Santa followed the maid's advice so far as to settle herself in bed again and begin to eat her breakfast. Beryl was already hard at work at hers, though between times she went on chattering, in her bright bird-like way, about the new house and garden, and the many plans of which her busy little head was always full.

Santa said very little, but Beryl was accus-

tomed to her sister's manner, and in no way put out by it. At last, however, Santa's silence struck her as more than usual.

'Why don't you answer?' said the little girl. 'Don't you care about having gardens of our own? All regular English children do, I know; I've read about it in books, and I want to be regular English children now we've come to live in England.'

'It's all very well for you,' said her sister. 'I don't think I shall ever feel quite at home here. I suppose where you're born makes some difference.'

And, indeed, to judge by Santa's dark eyes and hair and pale complexion, it would have been easy to believe that she was not of English birth at all.

'But it will be all right,' she went on, with a little sigh, 'if mamma gets well here.'

CHAPTER V.

SANTA AND BERYL.

AN hour later a little figure was pacing up and down the long garden-path at the back of the house. It was Beryl. From time to time she glanced anxiously towards the French window.

'I do wish Santa would come!' she said to herself. 'I don't believe it's good for mamma to go on speaking for such a time, and I do so want to fix about our gardens.'

Just then, however, she saw her sister at last coming out, and ran to meet her. How astonished she would have been if she had heard the exclamation made by some one, seated at a window on the first floor of the doctor's house next door, as for the moment she disappeared!

'Oh dear!' said Willie, speaking aloud in his

eagerness, though there was no one to hear, 'I do hope she hasn't gone in. I do so like watching her; she's such a jolly little girl, with that nice rough hair, not all stiff and neat like Mabel's. And how she did jump and run when she first came out, like a bird out of a cage'—Willie was growing quite poetical—'I do hope she 's not gone in to stay.'

No, in another moment the little figure came within view again, this time not alone. Willie flattened his nose against the pane, with breathless eagerness, to see all he possibly could.

'That's the other one,' he thought to himself.

She was taller, a good bit taller, than the first little girl, looking perhaps older than her real age, which was twelve. She was thinner and slighter than Beryl, with a mass of almost black hair hanging down her back, seeming almost too heavy for the small head, which nevertheless she held so erect. And when, after walking up to the farther end of the garden, the two turned and

came slowly towards the house again, Willie could see, as they drew nearer, that the elder girl's face was rather pale, though she did not look delicate, and that her eyes were dark and large.

'She's very pretty,' he decided. 'Something like a princess, but I'm sure I'd like the little one the best. The big one looks too grand to play.'

He changed his opinion as to this, however, a minute or two afterwards, when 'the princess' suddenly made a dart at her sister, who had been dancing on the path in front of her, and chased her right round the large grass plot.

This was supremely interesting. How Willie wished he could hear what they were saying!

They had been talking earnestly about their gardens, in which, after all, Santa took great interest.

'You shall do all the digging,' she said teasingly. 'It 'll do you good, Beryl; you are really getting such a little roundabout, you need lots

of exercise. I don't believe you can run a bit fast now.'

'Can't I?' said Beryl, hopping and skipping in front of her. 'Just try if you can catch me.'

Then after their scamper they quieted down again.

'I'm afraid we can't get many things to grow by next summer in our gardens,' said Beryl. 'They take so long in England. Do you think, perhaps, Santa, we could get some plants or flowers from Uncle Arthur's garden?'

'I don't know,' said Santa, 'we must ask mamma. Not yet, you know, we are not to say anything—not the very least thing to trouble her—till she's got rested from the journey. I don't even know about when we're to go to see uncle's house or anything. But by the bye, Beryl, we must leave off calling him Uncle "Arthur"—it isn't his proper name now.'

'*I* shall call it him always,' said Beryl. 'I don't care a bit whether it's the proper way or not. It's what he's always been to me.'

'You 're very silly,' said Santa. 'You might as well say that if papa was made "Sir," you 'd go on calling him "Mr" just because you 'd always known him as "Mr."'

'No,' said Beryl sturdily. 'It isn't like that at all. Papa 's always been and always will be "papa" to us. We don't address his letters "papa," and it 's just the same about uncle. Of course, if I was writing to him I 'd put his proper name on the envelope.'

'It isn't quite the same,' persisted Santa, but she was not inclined to discuss the matter more. She was not so energetic by a long way as her little sister. Perhaps she was wise in dropping any subject which might have led to disagreement, for, in spite of their long sleep, they were both still feeling a little upset and unsettled.

'It 's such a queer sort of day,' Beryl went on again. 'We can't have proper dinner an hour after breakfast, and we 're not to see mamma again till the afternoon, and there 's nothing to

do. Our books and schoolroom things aren't enough unpacked for us to arrange them.'

'We might go in and settle where to put them when they are unpacked,' said Santa. 'It's too cold to stay out here, unless we were running about or working in our gardens. I wonder who lives in the next-door house? It and ours look almost as if they were the same house, don't they?

They stopped on their way in, and looked up at the rows of windows, at one of which Willie's face was to be seen.

'Look, Santa,' said Beryl eagerly, for her eyes were very quick. 'There's a little girl—no, I believe it's a boy—up there looking out at us. How funny! He seems to be all alone in that big house!'

Santa glanced upwards.

'I daresay he has lots of brothers and sisters,' she said carelessly; 'only, perhaps, they don't care to stare out at the window. He can't have very much to do. But there's Nesbitt coming

to fetch us—I wonder what she wants. I hope there's nothing the matter with mamma.—What is it, Nesbitt?' she said anxiously, 'nothing wrong?'

'Oh dear, no, Miss Santa,' said the maid. 'You mustn't be so fidgety. I only came out to say that there's a few odds and ends wanted, which we're sure can be got in the town, and Mrs Fletcher thought it would be a nice little walk for you to go with me to the shops. You see, Françoise isn't very good at explaining herself. And Mrs Fletcher's asked your mamma, and she's quite pleased.'

Beryl gave a jump of pleasure. Even Santa seemed mildly gratified.

'And when we come in,' went on the maid, 'there will be a sort of meat-tea—early—for you couldn't have been hungry just yet, could you?'

'No,' said Santa, 'I'm still very sleepy, but I'm not a bit hungry.'

'I am,' said Beryl, 'not very—just a little.

It's just beginning a tiny bit. When we come in I shall be very exceedingly hungry. I almost think I'd like a glass of milk and a biscuit now.'

'Very well, certainly—I'll ask for it,' said the maid, while Santa turned on Beryl, with a sort of elder-sisterly superiority, which the little girl was not fond of.

'I never knew any one like you for being always hungry,' she said. 'And remember, there won't be any confectioners' shops here where you can tease Nesbitt and me to go in and buy you buns.'

'Won't there?' said Beryl dolefully.—'Do you really think there aren't any, Nesbitt?'

'We'll see when we go out. I think you had best get ready quickly; it's bright just now, but there's no saying that it will last.'

The milk and biscuit revived Beryl's spirits. She seemed very lively, indeed, when the little party started out, and ready to be amused by everything that came in her way.

'Beryl,' said her sister, 'you must walk quietly. Remember, though it's only a sort of a village compared with the big towns we've lived in, still it's not quite the country either, and people may think us very strange if we don't behave properly.'

'I'm going to behave properly,' said Beryl. 'But how funny it is, isn't it, Santa? No proper wide pavements, except here and there. And what funny names on the shops,' for by this time they were in the High Street. 'And, oh, did you see what a funny one there is on the little-boy-looking-out-of-the-window's door? "Pebbles"—"Dr Pebbles."'

'Then he must be "Master Pebbles,"' said Santa. 'He shouldn't be so inquisitive!'

'Poor little boy, don't call him that,' said Beryl. 'He needn't be—what is it?—'quisitive, just for looking at us in the garden. *I* think it is rather nice of him. I know if we were living somewhere, and people came next door, and p'r'aps there wasn't much else to look at, I'd look at

them, I'm sure I would. And he has rather a nice, little, thin face, and a sort of smooth, mousey head, cut so short—his hair, I mean. I think I'd like to know him.'

'Nonsense, Beryl,' said Santa, 'you know quite well we've come here to be *perfectly* quiet. We shan't even know any of the regular people—uncle's friends in the country near, I mean—till mamma's *quite* well, and perhaps not then, if she'd rather not. Any way, not till uncle comes. It would never do for mamma to be bothered with strange children about the house. Besides, what *can* you know about him just from seeing his face at the window? He may be a horrid boy!'

'I only said I *thought* he looked nice,' said Beryl, rather meekly.

But just then they were interrupted by Nesbitt's going into a shop which they had come to. It was an ironmonger's, not very interesting to the children, so, while the maid plunged into the mysteries of saucepans and

kettles, Santa and Beryl stayed near the door, amusing themselves by looking about them.

At that moment a dogcart drove up rapidly, and stopped in front of the shop. A gentleman, tall and pleasant-looking, jumped down and came in. As he passed the sisters he lifted his hat and glanced at them, something almost approaching a smile coming over his face. He went to the farther end of the counter, and they heard him giving directions about something he wished to have made. His voice was low and soft, as pleasant as his looks.

'What a nice man!' said Beryl approvingly, as they left the shop, Nesbitt having finished her commissions. 'He looked at us almost as if he knew us, did you see, Santa?'

Santa drew herself up.

'I never saw anything like you, Beryl,' she said, 'wanting to make friends with everybody!'

'I don't,' said the little girl indignantly. 'There was no harm in my saying he looked nice—any more than there was in my saying

that the little boy at the window looked nice.—Was there, Nesbitt?'

Nesbitt smiled. She was accustomed to her young ladies' little ways, and rather clever at smoothing down small storms.

'Well, just now, Miss Beryl, I must say,' she replied, 'you weren't far wrong when you said he was a nice-looking gentleman, and the young gentleman, too, by what one hears.'

'Why, do you know them?' said Beryl in astonishment, and even Santa looked curious.

'Yes, miss,' said the maid. 'That's to say I know the gentleman is the doctor who lives next door. He called this morning to ask how your mamma was. I believe he's coming to see her this afternoon. His housekeeper came in yesterday evening to see if she could help us in any way. Such a dear old lady! So friendly and old-fashioned, like an old picture, so to say.'

'How nice!' said Beryl; and even Santa condescended to add, 'I'd like to see her; perhaps

she'd let me take her portrait,' for Santa had considerable talent for drawing and painting.

'And did she tell you about the little boy, then?' inquired Beryl.

'Yes, miss, that's how I heard about him,' said Nesbitt importantly. 'He's the only child'——

'There now!' interrupted Beryl, turning to her sister. 'You said most likely he had a lot of brothers and sisters. 'I'm sure he's a nice boy.'

'So Mrs Groomridge—that's the housekeeper—says,' continued Nesbitt. 'He's a dear young gentleman. So patient for several years that he was ill, though he's stronger now, and the doctor like father and mother in one to him, for he has no mother. Mrs Groomridge was the doctor's own nurse, and long ago she knew his—— But here we are at the grocer's. Will you come in, or wait outside?'

'Let's go in,' said Beryl. 'I like to see them weighing out things, and if there are any of those little curranty biscuits, do order some, Nesbitt.'

'Yes,' agreed Santa. 'They are so good.'

By the time the walk was finished both the little girls felt refreshed and cheerful, and Santa, as well as Beryl, owned to being hungry. They were met at the door on their return by their mother's maid, Fletcher. She was an elderly woman, a sort of authority in the household, as Françoise was a good deal younger than she, and scarcely spoke any English.

'Tea will be ready in a quarter of an hour, my dears,' she said. 'Your mamma would like you to run in for a moment to see her before you take off your things.'

So the sisters went straight to Mrs Ross's room. It was on the first floor looking to the back—a large pleasant room, like most of those in the two old houses.

Mrs Ross was lying on a sofa, not far from the window, but the blinds were drawn down, and the whole room was dim and shady. The children were accustomed to its being so, for the terrible illness, from which some months before their

mother had barely escaped with her life, had left very great fears about her eyes. She was only now beginning to use them a little, though there were good hopes that complete rest and quiet would quite restore them.

Coming in just now from the brightness outside, the effect of the darkened room struck Santa rather sadly.

'Mamma, darling,' she said, as she went up to her mother and kissed her fondly, 'we've been such a nice walk! It's really a nice little town. I do hope before long you'll be able to go out with us again as you used to.'

They were very like each other, the mother and daughter—the same pale complexion, and dark hair, and large deep-brown eyes—though the smile which lighted up Mrs Ross's face gave it a sweeter and gentler expression than was usual on Santa's; for suffering, patiently borne, does its work as nothing else can do.

'I am so glad, dears, that you like the look of things,' said Mrs Ross. 'Berry, dear, I've

hardly seen you. Have you enjoyed the walk too?'

'Oh yes, mamma. I'm as hungry as anything. You know we've had no dinner to-day; we had breakfast almost at dinner-time,' the little girl replied.

'Poor famished little creatures!' said their mother, laughing. 'I mustn't keep you from your tea, then.'

'But mayn't I come back again?' asked Beryl. 'I've such lots of things to ask you. Oh, mamma, the garden is so nice; at least, it will be, when the things come up, and Santa and I are going to have little gardens of our own. We've been fixing about them. And do you think we could get some cuttings or plants from Uncle Artie's gardens? They must have such lots there.'

'I daresay you can,' said her mother. 'Some day—soon, perhaps, if I keep better—we may be able to drive over there.'

'That would be nice!' said Beryl, her buoyant spirits going up immediately, on hearing her

mother's cheerful tone. 'And have you looked out at the garden yet, mamma?' she went on. 'There are some funny little flowers out already, on the bed in front of your sitting-room. Do you think you'll come down-stairs to-morrow, mamma?'

A pained expression came over Mrs Ross's face.

'I don't know, dear; I'm afraid not,' she said, and she raised her thin white hand so as to shade her eyes. 'No, I haven't been able to look out at the garden yet,' she went on, rather wearily.

'Beryl,' said Santa, 'I'm sure our tea's ready.'

'I'm coming,' answered Beryl, in a moment. 'I only want to ask mamma one thing. Do you think I may know the little boy next door? He seems so nice, looking out of the window, and he's all alone, and'——

'Beryl, *come!*' interrupted Santa.

But Mrs Ross stroked the child's hand, which she was holding in her own.

'You must be patient, my pet,' she said. 'I'm afraid we can't make any new friends just yet—not till I'm a little stronger, and'——

Beryl showed some signs of persisting, but just then there came an interruption she could not disregard.

'If you please, ma'am,' said Fletcher, putting her head in at the door, 'Dr Peebles is downstairs.'

'Show him up,' said Mrs Ross.

'Beryl,' said Santa, when she had got her sister safely out of the room at last, 'you are really very naughty to tease mamma so. Of course, you can't begin knowing anybody just now, and we've never played with boys. It isn't as if we had brothers! *All* boys are noisy and wild,' she added, with perfect conviction.

Beryl looked rather snubbed, for in truth she felt guilty; she knew she shouldn't have asked her mother so many questions.

All the same she did full justice to the tempting meal which was ready for them. The

cold ham and chicken, Françoise's delicious 'brioches,' and some apricot jam—which their uncle's housekeeper had thoughtfully sent down with some other things of the kind, before their arrival—disappeared in a really alarming way.

'Oh!' said Beryl, with a sigh of satisfaction. 'I shouldn't mind missing dinner always if we had such nice teas.'

'I think you'd better take care, or you'll get too fond of eating,' said Santa, in her superior tone of voice.

CHAPTER VI.

GARDENING.

THEY did not see their mother again that evening—at least, not to speak to her. The various excitements of the day had ended by making Beryl very sleepy, and she went to bed early, and even Santa only got leave to run in for a moment to kiss Mrs Ross for 'good-night,' without speaking. For she was tired, Fletcher said: the journey was telling upon her more than had seemed the case at first. The doctor's orders had been to enforce perfect rest and quiet. The maid had looked grave when she told Santa this, but she added, to prevent the little girl's making herself unhappy, that he quite hoped a few days would show improvement.

'I'm afraid, though,' she said, 'we must

keep Miss Beryl out of her mamma's room for a while. She chatters too much. Poor dear, she's young, and it's difficult for her to remember.'

Beryl looked rather disconsolate the next morning, when told that she must not ask to see her mother at all till after the doctor's visit in the afternoon, and she felt still more put out when she found that her sister was to be allowed to sit quietly beside Mrs Ross, while Fletcher went out for some necessary purchases, which she could trust to no one but herself.

'It's too bad!' said Beryl, with a crosser look on her face than was often seen there. 'I could be quiet too, if I knew I must be. I wouldn't have spoken at all in mamma's room yesterday if anybody had told me not to.'

But she knew in her heart that she had not given in readily to Santa's warnings the evening before, and this made her still crosser.

'Come, come, my dear,' said Fletcher; 'there's

no need to work yourself up about it. I've a message for you from your mamma. If you like to go out with me just now, you may choose yourself a set of gardening tools at the ironmonger's, and that'll give you some nice work to do till your mamma gets better, and things are regular again.'

Beryl was delighted. She came home carrying the tools herself in great triumph, eager to begin operations at once—Fletcher fortunately reminding her that she mustn't run up-stairs shouting for her sister, as she was on the point of doing, and that a big 'overall' pinafore would be advisable.

She found Santa in their bedroom, getting out her writing materials.

'Look, Santa,' said the little girl, 'at these lovely tools. Isn't the spade a duck, and they're as strong as anything? I chose the very best. Fletcher said it was nonsense getting cheap things that would break at once.'

'They're very nice indeed,' said Santa, eyeing

them rather wistfully. 'I daresay mamma will let me have some too, or perhaps if I had a spade and a rake of my own, we could do with the others between us.'

'Of course,' said Beryl generously, as her good-humour had quite returned. 'I'll lend you any of them you like, till you get some of your own. You'll come out with me now, won't you, to fix exactly where our gardens are to be?'

'I'm afraid I can't possibly,' said Santa. 'I have to write a long letter to papa—quite a long letter—telling him everything: all about our coming here, and how mamma is, and—everything,' she repeated. 'Of course, I like writing to him, but I didn't know the mail went so soon as to-morrow.'

'You might write this afternoon,' said Beryl. 'I *do* think you might come out with me a little this morning. You make such a fuss about anything you have to do.'

'No,' replied Santa. 'I must write at once.

I daresay it will take me part of the afternoon too. It isn't making a fuss to do what mamma wishes, and you shouldn't say so.'

'You're very cross!' said Beryl, as she ran out. 'I shall just fix for myself about the gardens. You might have come out for a minute.'

Beryl was very childish, and perhaps a little spoilt. She knew it was unreasonable of her to be vexed with her sister; yet she did not try to overcome her cross feelings, though the sight of her pretty tools should have reminded her of her mother's kind thoughtfulness for her even when ill and suffering.

She ran at full speed to the farther end of the garden, trying to think herself a very ill-used little girl.

'I'll take the corner the farthest out of the way, and out of sight of the house,' she thought to herself. 'If they want to get rid of me—if Santa's always to be with mamma now—the more I'm out of the way the better.'

But when she had chosen her ground, and

marked it out neatly, as her father had taught her—for in the cool weather, at their home in the south, gardening had been one of his great amusements, and both little girls knew something about it—Beryl's changeable spirits rose again.

'It'll really be very nice,' she said aloud, though speaking to herself. 'Those bushes at one side, and a little path at the other, will give it quite a real look. I wonder how the path should be made. I suppose I must clear away the earth, and put stones, or something hard below the gravel—or perhaps it would do to tramp the earth down very firmly. I wish Santa were here—she'd know! I suppose I'll have to wait for the gravel till mamma's better, and I can ask her about it.'

She stood looking before her rather dolefully.

'It *is* dull, doing it all alone,' she said aloud, and as she spoke her eyes strayed up to the window where she and Santa had seen the small white face peeping out the day before. It was not there now, and she felt a little disappointed.

'I hope he won't leave off looking at us, she thought, with a curious feeling as if somehow or other the boy could have heard what Santa had said about him.

Then she turned to her garden again.

'I wish I knew'—— she began with a little sigh, but just then she started: a voice came through the bushes.

'Please,' it said, 'if it's about making a little gravel path you mean, I've got some beautiful rough stones in a corner here that would just do for a foundation. I daresay I could hand them through to you in basketfuls in my weed-basket.'

For a moment or two Beryl was too astonished to speak. She would scarcely have been more surprised if one of the dwarfs or gnomes of her favourite fairy tales had suddenly appeared in answer to her words. And, indeed, a dwarf or gnome it might still be, for all she knew; for so far she had seen no one.

'Where are you?' she said, turning round, and

stretching up on her tiptoes the better to see over the shrubs. Not that it was much use, for, with her utmost efforts, Beryl remained a very short person. 'Who are you that's speaking to me?'

'If you come a little bit farther back, nearer where the wall stops, the bushes aren't so thick, and you can see through. I can see *you* quite plain.'

Beryl did as she was told. 'Oh!' she said, when she found herself in the place pointed out. 'Oh! you're the boy next door.'

'Yes,' Willie replied simply, for Willie, of course, it was. 'Would you like to see some of the stones? I'll push a few through if you'll wait a minute.'

Then followed some rattling and shovelling, and in a minute a small open basket was skilfully pushed between the shrubs, Willie kneeling on the ground on his side, and guiding it with his hand as far as he could reach, so that it should not capsize and the contents fall out.

'I've got it,' said Beryl, who by this time was on her knees, on *her* side, and drawing the basket to her. 'Oh yes! I should think these would do beautifully,' she went on approvingly. 'Have you got plenty of them? How did you know I wanted to make a path in my garden? And who taught you how they're made?'

Willie's breath was rather taken away by all these questions that came tumbling out one after another in such a hurry. He looked at Beryl—that is to say, as well as he could see her—in silence for a moment before replying; then he took her questions in order, and answered deliberately:

'Yes, I've quite as many stones as you'll need,' he said. 'I heard you talking to yourself about the path, and I know one always thinks of paths first thing when you're settling a garden. I had to make a new one at my uncle's last year, and the gardener there showed me how. My garden here's very old; I've had it ever since I was a little boy.'

'You re not a very big boy now,' said his new friend critically. 'How old are you? I'm nine, at least close to nine, and Santa, my big sister, is twelve. Don't you think it's very dull to be all alone without any brothers or sisters? We saw you at the window; we thought you looked rather dull—at least, I did.'

Willie again remained silent for a moment or two before replying. Her way of asking so many questions in a breath confused him. Beryl grew impatient.

'Don't you understand what I say?' she asked. 'Why do you stare so? You're not stupid, are you?'

'I don't know,' said Willie, this time without much delay, and smiling a little. 'P'r'aps I am. I'm not used to talking very much. I suppose if I had brothers and sisters I'd be quicker. I can't answer all your questions. I don't know if it's dull not to have brothers and sisters, because I've never had any, so I don't know what it's like. I can tell you how old I am.'

'I should hope you could,' Beryl interrupted; 'you'd be very stupid if you couldn't tell *that!*'

'I'm nearly ten,' said Willie slowly, taking no notice of her pert speech.

'H—m,' she said, 'older than me, but younger than Santa. 'But,' she went on, 'it's very uncomfortable talking in this crouchy-down way —can't you come through? I want you to tell me how much earth to dig out for the path. I suppose you really know how to make it?'

'I've made lots,' said Willie, speaking for the first time with some spirit, which increased the little girl's respect for him. 'Of course I know how; but where are you going to get the gravel from for the top?'

'I don't know;' it was now Beryl's turn to reply, and that rather dolefully. 'It's very bothering. You see—— But can't you come through?' she repeated. 'It is so uncomfortable either to have to scrooge down on the ground, or else to talk to some one you scarcely see.'

'I could easily get through,' said Willie, 'but are you sure I may?'

'Would your papa mind?' asked she.

'No,' said Willie after a moment's thought. And it was true. Dr Peebles had said nothing *against* his making friends with the strangers; he had only told Willie he must not expect to do so. What he *had* expressly forbidden was the boy's talking about them to the servants or to other people. 'No,' he repeated, 'he never said I mightn't speak to you, and coming through the hedge wouldn't be any different. I wouldn't hurt the bushes.'

'No,' Beryl agreed, though at the same time she cast a slightly anxious look towards the house. No order had been distinctly given her either against making acquaintance with their neighbour. She had only been told to wait till her mother was better, and she knew she must not think of bringing the boy into the house; but, on the other hand, Nesbitt had spoken warmly in praise of Willie and his father, and

even Santa's objections had only been that 'all' boys were wild and noisy. Still, Beryl was very sensitive to some of her sister's sayings; she had no wish to be thought too ready to make acquaintances, as Santa said she was. It was much more dread of remarks of this kind than any misgiving that she was doing wrong which made her throw uneasy glances towards the windows.

Suddenly she remembered that Santa was busy writing; there was no fear of her coming out or seeing her.

'Do come,' she said more eagerly. 'I'll show you all about how I'm going to have my garden.'

And at the cost of a slight scratch or two, and possibly some small rents in his sailor suit, Willie emerged, rather red in the face—though this may have been partly the result of shyness also—but triumphant.

'You've not torn yourself, have you?' said Beryl anxiously. 'Oh yes, I'm afraid you have just a little. See—your sleeve at the elbow.'

Willie twisted his head round to look at it, but without much concern.

'It doesn't matter,' he said; 'it's my old suit. Besides, Mrs Groomridge never minds if I do tear my things a little.'

'*Doesn't* she?' said Beryl. 'How awfully nice she must be! Is she your nurse?'

'No, not exactly: she's the housekeeper. She was papa's nurse once,' replied the boy.

'Oh yes; I remember. She came in the first night to see if we wanted anything—Nesbitt, that's our maid, told me. I suppose your papa sent her. I saw him yesterday in a shop. He's got a nice face,' she went on amiably.

Willie scarcely knew whether to be pleased or vexed. Beryl was something quite new in the way of little girls to him.

'He couldn't help having a nice face,' he replied, after his usual moment of silence and reflection. 'He's the very nicest person in all the world, you see.'

His companion opened her eyes very wide at this.

'*You* think so, you mean,' she said. '*I* think so of my father and mother; so I suppose it's all right. Come along here,' and she led the way to the chosen spot, which she had marked out; 'the path is to go'—— Suddenly she stopped and began to laugh. Willie gazed at her.

'What'—— he began, but she interrupted him.

'Oh,' she said, 'it came into my head all of a sudden how funny it was that you should give me stones for my garden-path and that your name should be *Pebbles!* I thought it a funny name when I saw it marked up on your door, but now it seems ever so much funnier.'

This time there was no doubt about Willie's getting red.

'My name *isn't* Pebbles,' he said. 'You can't know how to read very well, and you can't know much jography either if you've never heard of a place in Scotland called "Peebles." That's

the same name as ours, and papa's family lived there.'

'So he's Scotch,' remarked Beryl composedly. 'My papa's Scotch too. His name's "Ross"—that's *all* our name, I mean; and there's a place in Scotland called "Ross." Did you know that?'

'No,' said Willie honestly, 'I didn't.'

'Then you needn't be so very sharp on me for not knowing about Peb—Peebles,' said Beryl. 'I shall always *think* of you as Pebbles, I'm afraid,' she went on, with mischief in her eyes, 'because of the stones, you see; but I promise you I'll try not to say it, if you don't like it. And it's no good our beginning to quarrel, is there? I quarrel with Santa quite enough: that's the worst of having a sister.'

It was Willie's turn to open his eyes.

'You don't really mean that?' he said at last, almost with a gasp.

Beryl laughed, but she looked a little ashamed too.

'No, I don't mean it in any horrid way,' she

said. 'I love Santa *dreadfully*, and so she does me; and I think she is so pretty, don't you? Oh no, I forgot; of course you haven't seen her.'

'Yes, I have. I saw her out of the window, and I thought she looked like a princess,' said Willie.

'That was *very* nice of you,' replied Beryl approvingly. 'And it's quite true. But do you know we're wasting ever such a lot of time. Do let's go on about the garden'—— Then a new thought struck her. 'I don't know your name—your first name, I mean—I don't know what to call you.'

'My name's Willie,' replied the boy—'William Arthur. When I was very little, I think papa meant to call me "Arthur." It's my godfather's name, and he's a great friend of papa's—at least, he used to be. I've never seen him; but then papa changed and called me "Willie."'

'It's a nice name!' said Beryl condescendingly. 'I like regular English names. I *love* "Arthur." It's our uncle's name, and, next to papa, I love

Uncle Arthur the best of all the men in the world. What 's your papa's name?'

'Hugh,' said Willie.

'And my papa is "Kenneth"—that's Scotch.'

'So 's "Hugh,"' said Willie.

It seemed a little bond between them. Then they set to work at the garden, where Willie suggested some improvements, which Beryl approved of. They were so busy and interested that Willie quite started when he heard his dinner-bell ring.

'I must go,' he said, preparing to creep through the hole again.

'What a pity!' exclaimed Beryl; 'we were getting on so well. Shall you come out again?'

'I don't much think I'll come out into the garden again to-day,' said Willie. 'I have to go a regular walk this afternoon.'

'I daresay I shall have to go a walk too,' said Beryl; 'but I'll come out to-morrow morning, I think.'

'I'll look out,' said Willie. 'I can see you

beautifully from my bedroom window; if you'll just stand out in the middle there and look up and nod to me, I can always come in a minute if I'm not at my lessons.'

'All right,' said the little girl, 'I'll not forget.'

And then she stood watching him gradually disappear; the soles of his boots being the last she saw of him. It was not a very dignified kind of 'exit' certainly, but it added a little feeling of adventure and mystery to their friendship, which had a charm for both children.

CHAPTER VII.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS.

BERYL did not stay long in the garden after Willie had left her. There was not much more she could do till he gave her the rest of the stones for the foundation of her path. So she wandered about a little in a rather idle way, choosing in her own mind, here and there, shrubs which she would like, if possible, to have transplanted to her own territory. And she was not sorry when Santa's figure appeared at the top of the short flight of steps leading from the door-window of what was going to be their mother's sitting-room.

Santa had no hat or jacket on; only a shawl wrapped round her loosely.

'I've just run out for a minute,' she said, as Beryl came to meet her. 'It's almost dinner-

time, and I feel so muzzy and stupid with writing all this time, I thought I'd like a breath of air. I've been writing in mamma's sitting-room. There's a nice fire there, and Fletcher wants it used, for it not to feel chilly and empty when mamma first comes down-stairs.'

'I wish she was there now,' said Beryl. 'It's horrid for me, not even seeing her a minute.'

'Yes, poor Berry,' said Santa sympathetically, 'it is. And you have been very good not to grumble, and to stay out here so quietly by yourself.'

Beryl loved to be praised by her sister. Even her mother's approval was not so precious to her; perhaps because, as a rule, Santa's manner was dry and rather cold, and we all care most for the good things we receive but rarely. She had been on the point of telling Santa of her visitor through the hedge; indeed, only the fear of her sister's looking down upon her for her readiness to make friends had kept her from doing so at once—not, as I said, any idea that

she had been really doing anything that was wrong.

Now for the first time a misgiving crept into her mind that perhaps Santa might be really vexed with her, and it would be such a pity just now, when she had been speaking so kindly. Beryl glanced up in her sister's face, and her courage failed her.

'If Santa comes out to-morrow morning, I'll tell her,' she decided. 'It will be time enough, and when she sees what a nice boy he is, she can't be vexed.'

So she said nothing, accepting the praise she knew she did not deserve. And after a minute or two they went in to dinner.

Santa's writing was not yet finished. It took her quite another hour to complete her letter to her father and another as well to mother's brother, the 'Uncle Arthur' spoken of by Beryl, who was also abroad, though not so far away as Mr Ross.

Poor Beryl's patience was a good deal tried, but she was rewarded at last by being allowed to

creep into her mother's room just for a moment and to kiss her, though without speaking.

'Mamma does look very tired to-day,' she said to Fletcher as she came out of the room.

'Yes, my dear,' said the maid, with a little shake of the head. 'I'm afraid we were pleased too soon about her having got over the journey so well. The doctor says she *can't* be kept too quiet.'

'Is it that doctor next door? The one Nesbitt says is so nice?' asked Beryl.

'What does Nesbitt know about him?' said Fletcher sharply. 'Of course, it stands to reason we couldn't have any doctor that wasn't nice for your dear mamma.'

And Beryl heard her murmuring to herself something about 'chatter and gossip,' so that she began to think she would be even more frightened of Fletcher knowing about Willie's visit through the hedge than of Santa's hearing of it.

That afternoon, when the letters were finished, the little girls went for a walk with Nesbitt,

and Beryl noticed that Nesbitt was not in as good spirits as usual. She was quite kind and gentle, for she was really a very nice girl, and accustomed to be sometimes reproved by Fletcher, who was a cousin of her mother's; but still Beryl felt sorry for her, as she was almost certain that Nesbitt had been blamed on account of what she herself had told of the maid's remarks about Dr Peebles.

'I'm sure she said no harm,' thought Beryl. 'Fletcher is so fussy. But it shows how they'd be about my speaking to Willie;' and it troubled her the more because she could not make up her mind to consult Santa about it.

For Santa, the walk did not promise to be very amusing, as both her companions were so silent, and for once she was more inclined than Beryl to object when Nesbitt proposed that they should turn in the direction of the country instead of through the town.

'It's too early for the country to be pretty. The trees aren't out yet, and there are no flowers,'

she said. 'And I think this funny little old lane is so amusing. I want to see the church.'

'You forget, Santa,' said Beryl, 'in England the churches aren't always open the nice way they are in other countries. I wouldn't mind going along the road that leads to Uncle Artie's. I want to see how far it is. You know when we stayed there those few days last autumn we only came once to Market-St-Cross, and we were driving. You can't tell a bit how far off a place is when you're driving.—Do you know which road takes us that way, Nesbitt?'

'Oh yes, miss,' said Nesbitt eagerly. She was evidently anxious to avoid a walk through the town, where her sociable nature had already gained her some friends in the shops, which Miss Beryl's sharp eyes might be quick to observe. 'The old—the doct'—— But here she stopped short. 'It's one of the prettiest walks, I believe. You go round by a sort of little hill they call Ferney Knoll—you don't need to climb it, of course, unless you want to see the view—and then

there's a lane that takes you right to the Chase without any need of going by the high-road at all.'

'How nice that would be!' said Beryl. 'How clever of you to have learned so well about how to go!'

'But I don't think we can go all the way to-day,' said Santa. 'If we just went as far as the little hill and saw the view, it would be nice.'

So they set off in that direction, Nesbitt's spirits rising again with the importance of being her young ladies' guide.

It was a very pleasant afternoon. Other people, too, had been attracted out by the sunshine and the mild yet fresh springlike air; and the walk to Ferney Knoll, along the lane known as Ferney Stroll, was a very favourite one with the good people of Market-St-Cross.

As the little sisters were coming down the hill, from the top of which they had enjoyed the same view as the one which had led to Willie's

conversation with Betsy a few days before, they almost ran into—for the path was narrow—a party beginning the ascent. It consisted of two or three grown-up people and two children. The children were somewhat behind the others—a boy and girl—but they did not seem to be speaking to each other. As they drew quite near, the four children, Santa and Beryl, and the two new-comers, almost touched, and Santa, who was in front, was surprised to hear her sister give a little exclamation of surprise, and, turning round, she saw Beryl smiling, though with rather a red face, at the boy.

'Beryl,' she said, as soon as they were out of earshot, 'how can you do such strange things? You were *smiling* as if you knew him, at that boy.'

'Well,' said Beryl, 'I do know him, and you might know him too. You've seen him at the window, don't you remember? It's the boy next door, Willie Pebbles.'

'*Willie!*' repeated Santa, in a tone of great

scorn, 'you actually know his name! How do you find out things like that? I'm afraid you're really a very vulgar little girl, Beryl.'

Beryl's face grew still redder, but she said nothing, though at most times she would have flown into a temper at having such an unpleasant word applied to her. Santa glanced at her curiously. The sight of the child's crimson cheeks made her rather sorry.

'Poor Beryl,' she thought, 'it's very good of her not to say anything. I shouldn't have called her that.'

And for the rest of the walk she was particularly kind and nice to Beryl, which made the little girl feel really conscience-stricken. For though after all she had not done anything actually wrong or clearly disobedient, she knew it would have been better to have told Santa about having made friends with Willie, and in this way have perhaps got leave to play with him openly.

It is a pretty safe rule for children to follow,

that if they have done or are doing anything they are afraid to tell, there must be something not *quite* right about it.

And while the little sisters and Nesbitt were making their way home, another conversation, and not a very pleasant one, was taking place between the people whom the Ross children had met on the hill.

The boy was, of course, Willie Peebles; the girl was Mabel Perfect, who, with her aunts, had watched him and Betsy, and, without actual rudeness, he could not have refused Miss Grace's proposal that they should walk up to the top of the Knoll together.

Mabel's eyes were sharp, sharper even than Beryl's—much sharper than Santa's.

'Who are those girls?' she asked him at once. 'You must know them. The little one smiled at you.'

'Well,' Willie replied, trying to fence, 'I never said she didn't.'

'You know what I mean; don't pretend that

silly way,' said Mabel. 'People don't smile like that in the street if they don't know each other.'

'This isn't the street,' Willie replied, 'and I've neither said I knew them nor didn't know them.'

'You're very rude,' said Mabel angrily.—'Aunt Grace,' she called out, for by this time they were almost at the top of the little hill, 'I wish you'd tell Willie that it's very rude not to answer when he's spoken to.'

Miss Sophia stopped short, so did old Miss Perfect and Miss Maria, for all three ladies were there.

'Of course,' said Miss Sophia, 'but I'm sure *Willie* couldn't be so rude.'

'No, indeed,' said stout Miss Perfect good-naturedly. 'There must be some mistake somewhere.'

But Miss Maria only laughed. Willie disliked Miss Maria's laugh, and it made him begin to feel obstinate and contradictory.

'Yes,' he said, 'there is a mistake. I did

answer Mabel when she spoke to me; but I'm not going to answer all her questions—that's a different thing.'

'I only asked him who those girls were, as I saw he knew them,' said Mabel.

All three ladies drew nearer, pricking up their ears, so to say.

'Of course Willie knows them. They are the young ladies next door, who have come to live at Mr Rotherby's,' said Miss Sophia. 'Why should you not have answered Mabel simply, my dear boy?'

'She didn't mean it that way. She meant me to begin telling her all about them, and I'm not going to,' Willie blurted out, his face flaming. 'She said I smiled at them. I daresay she knew who they were already—only she wanted to make me talk about them.'

'Oh, you rude impertinent boy!' said Mabel, in a fury.

'Upon my word!' said Miss Sophia.

'There must be some mistake,' repeated the

eldest sister, who was always slow to give up an idea once she had got hold of it, perhaps because not very many came her way, poor lady.

'No,' said Miss Maria; 'I don't think there is any mistake,' and then she gave her disagreeable little laugh.

'Really,' said Miss Sophia, 'it's ridiculous for our walk to be spoilt by such nonsense. Why should you be so put out at Mabel's thinking you knew those young ladies, Willie? What could be more natural, considering they live next door and your papa's their doctor, and'——

'That's just why,' interrupted Willie. 'Papa says—— I mean he doesn't tell me about them because he's their mother's doctor. I don't know them that way. I didn't mean to be rude, but I don't want to disobey papa, and please— I'd rather turn back again and go home with Betsy.'

He was not far off tears by this time, though,

as I have said, he was by no means a babyish boy, and it took a great deal to make him cry. Had he done so it would have been more from anger than distress.

'Certainly,' said Miss Sophia, disagreeably, 'if you cannot make yourself pleasanter I should think it's the best thing you can do. I am sure your dear papa won't be at all pleased when he hears about it.'

She turned, and Willie, closely followed by the faithful Betsy, took refuge for the second time in flight.

'Mabel,' said Miss Sophia, when they had walked on a little way, 'you're a very silly child! What was the use of bursting out upon the boy in that way? I told you to find out quietly if he knew those children, and to hear all about them. Instead of that you put it at once into his head that we are inquisitive gossips, and set him on his guard.'

'I didn't know we were going to meet those girls,' said Mabel sulkily. 'Of course, when I

saw him smiling at them, it was natural to ask if he knew them. He's a horrid boy, saying those things!'

'Well,' said Miss Sophia, 'Dr Peebles *has* to be very particular about gossips in a little place like this, where everybody knows things before they happen! But he would make a difference with *us;* he would be very angry indeed if he knew how rude Willie had been.'

'I hope you'll tell him, then, and that Willie will get a good setting-down,' said Mabel elegantly.

'Oh, poor boy,' said old Miss Perfect, 'it would be a pity for him to be scolded about it; he's only a child, when all's said and done!'

Miss Maria shook her head sagaciously.

'I don't care a bit about the child,' she said. 'What I want to find out is what all this mystery and fuss is about! Did you see how red the boy got? Evidently there's something or other he's been told not to tell.'

'The biggest girl doesn't look English,' said

Miss Sophia. 'Perhaps they are foreigners of some kind.'

'She looks as proud as a peacock, whatever she is,' said Mabel. '*She* didn't smile at Willie; it was the little one.'

'Well, whatever they are,' said Miss Sophia, 'I must say that I think Dr Peebles is acting very shabbily indeed to us, his oldest and best friends.'

Miss Maria did not reply, but she probably thought the more.

Willie and Betsy in the meantime were making their way home in silence. Willie was feeling very depressed.

'It's the second walk those Miss Perfects have spoiled for me,' he thought to himself. 'I wish papa would tell them as well as me not to talk about other people. Now, very likely, I'll be scolded for having been rude to them.'

For some little distance along the lane the figures of Santa and Beryl and their maid remained in sight. Then a sudden turn hid them

from view, and Willie slackened his pace. Hitherto he had been walking fast, partly to get the more quickly away from the Perfect ladies, partly with a vague idea that he might perhaps overtake the little sisters, and be invited to walk on with them.

'They can't want to speak to me,' he decided, 'or else the little one would have looked back before they turned.'

But just then Beryl, on the contrary, had no wish to come across Willie again. She remained silent and dull all the way home, and the kinder Santa was to her, the more uneasy she became.

Santa was accustomed, however, to Beryl's rather uncertain and changeable moods. Besides this, her own mind was just now very much occupied with anxiety about her mother. She was therefore the more surprised that night, when, soon after going to bed, she heard her little sister crying softly.

'Beryl,' said Santa, not quite sure if her ears were deceiving her, for she had just been dropping

off to sleep, 'are you crying? Whatever is the matter? Is it about mamma?'

'N—no,' sobbed Beryl; 'at least, I'm very sorry about mamma, and now you've put it in my head, I daresay I'll cry worse—all night, I shouldn't wonder,' with rather unreasonable reproach. 'But it wasn't about mamma that started me off crying,' she went on, rather mysteriously.

Something in her tone struck Santa. She could see that Beryl wanted to be cross-questioned to give her courage to tell what was on her mind.

'Would you like to come into my bed?' she said. 'If it's anything you've done that you want to tell me about—anything—well, a little naughty, you know, perhaps! I'm sure you wouldn't do a big naughty thing.'

This well-meant encouragement only caused the little girl's sobs to redouble.

'You're very kind, Santa,' she said. 'After I've told you, I'll come into your bed for you to kiss me, if you will, but I'd rather tell you first

I really don't know whether it was naughty or not, but I suppose it must have been, because I didn't like to tell you. It's about that boy—the Pebbles boy. I do know him—more than you think—and I tried to make out to you that I only knew him by sight at the window. He came into the garden to-day and played with me—at least, he helped with the path I wanted to make.'

'Beryl!' said Santa in astonishment. 'But still,' she went on, after a moment's reflection, 'that wasn't your fault. It was very forward of *him*.'

'Oh, but,' said Beryl, 'I asked him to come. He crept through the bushes; he did look so funny!' she went on, with a little laugh in the midst of her tears, 'something like a big caterpillar.'

Then she told Santa all the particulars of Willie's visit. 'Was it very naughty of me?' she asked at the end.

Santa drew a long breath before she answered.

'I don't quite know,' she said. 'No, not very naughty. It would have been if you had gone on playing with him without telling. I must think about it, and to-morrow we must ask somebody. I don't know if we must ask mamma; perhaps we could, but I'll see. Anyway, I'm very glad you've told me now. You mustn't get out of bed, I'm coming to you to kiss you; I can feel my way quite well.'

'Thank you very much, Santa,' said Beryl, with a sigh of relief, when the kissing had been accomplished, and Santa was safe back in her own quarters again.

Soon after, by her regular breathing, she knew that her little sister was asleep.

'Poor Berry,' she thought, 'it is rather dull for her just now. If he's *quite* a nice boy, it might be a good thing to know him just a little.'

She didn't allow to herself what was nevertheless the truth—that she was not without some wish to make Willie's acquaintance on her own account!

CHAPTER VIII.

VISITORS IN THE DRAWING-ROOM.

DIFFERENTLY as they had been brought up, and different as they were in themselves, there were some ways in which Beryl Ross and Willie Peebles were like each other, and one of these was a very good way: they had both very tender consciences.

Perhaps in the matter of their meeting in the garden there was even less on Willie's mind than there had been on his little neighbour's. His father had certainly never forbidden him to speak to or make friends with the strangers; he had only told him he must not *expect* to do so. What he had so distinctly forbidden was any talking about them or their affairs to other people, or even to the servants.

'And I did try not to tell the Miss Perfects

anything about them,' thought Willie to himself, 'and it only made them say I was very rude to that Mabel, and perhaps I was. I didn't know what to say. I wish papa wouldn't tell me things I don't understand. I wonder if he'd be vexed if he knew about my going into their garden?'

The question raised an uneasy feeling somewhere down at the bottom of his heart; he felt that his father would not have wished him to make friends in this sort of way, and he was too honest to deceive himself.

'I suppose the only way will be to tell papa all about it,' he decided with a sigh.

So it came to pass that more than an hour after Beryl was sleeping peacefully—quite happy now that she had opened her heart to her sister—poor Willie, on the other side of the wall, was tossing about, wishing he could go to sleep, and yet feeling that he could not do so till he had seen his father.

Dr Peebles was late that evening. It was half-past nine o'clock before he peeped in at Willie's

door, just to '*see* him for good-night,' as the boy used to call it, when his father told him afterwards that he had been sleeping too soundly to be disturbed.

There was a night-light in Willie's room, which was always left there till after his father's visit; but this evening, even had there been no light at all, Dr Peebles would not have been left in doubt as to the boy's being still awake. The gentle opening of the door made him start up at once.

'Oh, papa,' he exclaimed, 'is that you? I've been staying awake for you such a time.'

There was something of distress in his tone, which caught his father's ear at once.

'You shouldn't have stayed awake, Willie,' he said, as he sat down by the bedside, and took hold of the boy's small hot hand. 'Why, what's the matter? What have you been working yourself up about? Nothing wrong, surely? Couldn't it have waited till the morning?'

'I don't know,' said Willie. 'I don't know if it's anything wrong or not, but I'm afraid it is,

because I'm almost sure you'll be vexed when you hear about it. But I didn't mean to do wrong: you hadn't said exactly, and she called me. It would have been rude not to answer, and then, after all, I was rude to that Mabel Perfect; and I suppose it's ruder to be rude to a girl, and *she's* a girl, but then Mabel's a girl, too.' He stopped short, looking up at his father, with flushed face, and eyes clouded with perplexity and apprehension.

Dr Peebles' face grew graver.

'What are you talking about, Willie?' he said. Perhaps if he had not been a doctor he might have been tempted to think the child was light-headed. 'It is very bad for you to lie awake at night like this, but, as things are, I suppose you'd better tell me all about it. Pull yourself together, and think it over quietly, and tell it me from the beginning.'

Willie did his best, but his father's manner made him nervous, and he told his tale in a very bungling fashion—making it by no means clear

for some time whether it was he, or Beryl, or Mabel, or old Miss Perfect herself, who had crept through the hedge into the next-door garden, and whether the rudeness had consisted in something to do with a lot of stones, or in hurrying along Ferney Stroll to get out of somebody's way. But, by degrees, the story got pieced together in a comprehensible form, and the sight of some large tears, slowly rising in Willie's eyes, and trickling down his poor little flushed face, went far to disarm his father's vexation with *him*, though he could not deny that the whole affair was annoying.

'I wish those good ladies would leave other people's affairs alone,' he said grimly. Willie did not seem to notice the words.

'You 're not angry with me, papa?' he said.

'Angry? No, certainly not,' his father replied. 'But I wish you had told me before how much you wanted to know these little girls, and how interested you were in them. I didn't think you cared about knowing them.'

'I only meant to watch them,' said Willie timidly.

Dr Peebles sat silent. He was thinking to himself how difficult it was with all his efforts to win the boy's full and constant confidence; the very fact of the many hours in each day they must be apart was against it. He sighed.

'You have meant to please me, I see,' he said to Willie at last, 'but if we had spoken more about it, I could have made you understand that, if you are to know them at all, it must be in a different way. It would never do for you and Miss Beryl to go on creeping under hedges, and that style of thing.' Here he could not help smiling a little. 'But go to sleep now,' and he leant over to kiss him, 'and to-morrow, or as soon as I can, I will tell you what I wish you to do.'

'I hope it will be to-morrow,' said Willie; 'she's sure to be in the garden.'

'Then don't go into the garden till I've spoken to you again,' said Dr Peebles decidedly.

'But if I go a walk,' said Willie, with some half-unconscious malice, 'I may meet the Miss Perfects, and what am I to say to them? You haven't told me.'

'Say nothing to them,' his father replied. 'They will not question you any more.'

He extinguished the night-light as he spoke, and went down to his study, and a few minutes later Owen, the page, might have been seen, whistling as he went, hastening along in the direction of Swan Villa, the residence of the Misses Perfect.

Curiosity is not a good habit to encourage, I know, but for once I think we may indulge in it by peeping inside the envelope which Owen held in his hand.

These were its contents:

'DEAR MISS PERFECT—I am sorry to hear from my boy that he must have behaved, or seemed to behave, "rudely" to you to-day. I can only plead in his excuse that he was literally obeying my wishes in refusing to say

anything about a family who have recently come to live here, and whose medical attendant I have the honour to be. With the most scrupulous care, it is impossible for Willie to avoid sometimes hearing little things about my patients. I have therefore made a hard-and-fast rule for him that he should never talk about such matters at all. This will explain his apparent discourtesy. You will easily understand that a child's want of tact alone was to blame.—Believe me, yours faithfully, HUGH PEEBLES.'

We will not follow the letter to its destination. Had it concerned old Miss Perfect only, her good-nature would probably have accepted it as an ample apology for poor Willie; but, as it was, I am afraid that from that evening a large amount of positive spite mingled in the feelings with which the Misses Maria, Sophia, and Mabel Perfect regarded the poor boy.

The next morning was rainy. On the whole, Willie was not sorry.

'It would have been horrid,' he said to himself,

'to see her out in the garden, and not have been able to go to her. I'm very glad I told papa, but I wish he'd talk about it again to me.'

The day dragged on rather wearily. The recent fine weather had accustomed Willie to being a good deal out of doors, and he had got rather out of the way of amusing himself in the house. As soon as he had finished his dinner, he set to work to prepare his lessons for the next morning, with a sort of hope that later in the afternoon his father might send for him.

'It would be nice to tell him I'd done them all,' he said to himself, and his foresight was rewarded.

About four o'clock he heard the hall door shut, and a moment or two afterwards his father looked in at the nursery door.

'Willie,' he said, 'I want you to come downstairs. Are you tidy? Let me look at you. Yes, you'll do.'

'My hands are quite clean,' said Willie. 'I

washed them just after dinner, and I've not been playing about—I've been doing my lessons. They're all finished!'

'So much the better,' said his father. 'Come along, then. There are some ladies in the drawing-room who want to see you.'

Willie started back in affright.

'Oh, papa,' he said, 'is it the Miss Perfects? Have I to beg their pardon? If it's that Mabel'——

Dr Peebles could scarcely keep back a smile.

'No,' he said. 'It isn't Mabel Perfect, nor her aunts. You'll see who it is.'

The drawing-room in the doctor's house was meant to be a pretty room—it had been a very pretty room during the two short years of Willie's young mother's life at Market-St-Cross, but that was nine years ago now. The roses on the chintz curtains had faded; the books on the book-shelves looked as if no one ever opened them; the old china, which its owner had been so proud of, though carefully dusted and neatly arranged,

looked stiff and formal. Worst of all, there were no flowers in the room, no work-basket open in pretty confusion, no signs of life about the writing-table. Everything seemed deserted, and, to any one who knew the whole story, unspeakably sad.

But it did not strike Willie so: he had never known it otherwise. The word 'drawing-room' meant to him something strange and cold and unhomelike. He entered it now for perhaps the first time in his life with a feeling of eager expectation: something in his father's face had made him guess that there was a surprise, and not an unpleasant one, in store for him.

He was not disappointed.

Two figures were standing in the middle of the room. Both came forward, as he and his father entered, one running a little in front of the other.

'It's *me*, Willie,' said an eager little voice; and Willie, hardly able to believe his eyes, saw that it was Beryl.

A PLEASANT SURPRISE.

'Isn't it nice!' she went on. 'We've come to call on you properly, you see. Your papa's brought us himself, and now we shall know each other so nicely. This is Santa;' and the elder girl came forward, smiling as she held out her hand to him.

'The princess one,' thought Willie to himself, looking rather shy and awkward, I am afraid, for he felt half bewildered.

'I am so glad!' he managed to get out at last, and then he glanced up at his father, who was standing by, looking both pleased and amused.

'Oh, papa!' said Willie, 'thank you so much!'

Dr Peebles was touched.

'Perhaps I have done wrong,' was the thought that passed through his mind, 'in leaving him so companionless. I hope I shall manage better in future, thanks to Mrs Ross;' for Dr Peebles had had a long talk with Mrs Ross that morning, the result of which was this visit from her two little girls.

'Now I must be off,' said Dr Peebles. 'Mrs

Ross has very kindly asked you to go home to have tea with her two daughters this afternoon, Willie. That will be a pleasant way of spending this dull dreary day, won't it? Only I must tell you that I have promised that you will be very, very quiet—not that you are ever very noisy.'

'I'm sure he isn't half as noisy as we are,' put in Beryl.

'You may teach him to be a little noisier, if you like,' said Dr Peebles, 'but that must be in this house, or in the garden; and when you come home this evening, Willie, I shall want to see you for a little, to explain what Mrs Ross and I have settled.'

Willie looked a little bit uneasy. Maybe, visions of the Miss Perfects and their questionings rose before him.

'Don't look so unhappy,' said Beryl. 'There's nothing wrong. Santa and I quite understand, and so will you. Now mayn't we go?'

'Beryl and I thought you would help us to arrange our book-shelves, and some other little

things in our schoolroom,' said Santa, speaking for the first time. She had a nice soft voice, and she spoke more slowly than Beryl. Willie looked up at her gratefully.

'I'd like that awfully,' he said.

Five minutes later he found himself standing in the street, at the front door of the next house, with his new friends. How strange it seemed! he could scarcely believe that inside all would not look as in the old days, when he used to be taken in for a few minutes, to pay a visit to Mr Rotherby, for he had never entered the house since then; but, once the door was opened, the past remembrances seemed to fade away like a dream, and a new and bright present to take their place.

CHAPTER IX.

A PLEASANT AFTERNOON.

WE left Willie and his two new friends just entering the hall of what was now Mrs Ross's house. It all looked so pretty already, even though several of the rooms were still unarranged, waiting for the invalid's own directions, when she should be well enough to give them.

'That 's to be mamma's sitting-room,' said Santa, as she led the way across the square hall, where a bright fire was burning, and a delicious, large, crimson flossy rug gave colour and brightness to the old-fashioned black and white tiles.

'I know,' said Willie, 'that 's the room with steps leading into the garden. Timmins told me about it, when he was doing up the bed in front. He said the lady was ill, and must have some nice

flowers to look out on. Timmins is the gardener. I hope the crocuses and things he put in will come up soon.'

'I hope poor mamma will be able to look at them when they do,' said Santa, with a little sigh, while Beryl remarked approvingly—

'What a nice man Timmins must be!'

'Is your mamma worse?' said Willie sympathisingly.

'She has been worse since we came,' Santa replied, 'but she's a little better to-day. Dr Peebles is going to tell you all about her, and why we're so anxious, and have to be so quiet.'

'It's her eyes,' whispered Beryl mysteriously, opening her own big blue ones very wide, 'but I'm sure now she's going to get better; I've a feeling she is, so do let us be happy. It's all come so nice about you, Willie, and I'm so glad I told Santa, and that you told Dr Pebbles about us in the garden—aren't you?'

She gave a little skip to let off her good spirits,

but Santa, glancing at Willie, saw that he grew rather red.

'Beryl,' she said, 'you know that Willie's papa is going to explain it all to him, himself. You shouldn't speak as if Willie had done anything wrong that he didn't want to tell about.'

'It wasn't that,' said Willie; 'it's only'—— and he hesitated. 'If you wouldn't mind, Beryl, I wish you wouldn't call papa that name; it sounds so silly. It makes me feel as if you were muddling it up with my giving you the stones for your path.'

'What an idea!' said Beryl, with another skip. 'I called it him ages before I spoke to you in the garden. I saw it written up on the front door—at least, I thought I did, but, if you'll tell me the right way to say it, I'll try to remember.'

'*Peebles*,' said Willie, 'the same as the place in Scotland, I told you. Two "es" and one "b"—that's how it's on our front door.'

'I don't think it sounds much different,' said Beryl. 'What a particular boy you are! But

I'll try to say it right. I'll tell you what, Willie; you must creep through the bushes in the garden once, for Santa to see; you did look so exactly like a boy turned into a caterpillar, or a caterpillar turned into a boy! It makes me laugh whenever I think of it.'

Willie grew rather red again.

'Beryl,' said Santa, 'you're not so fond of being made fun of yourself.'

Willie glanced up gratefully at Santa. His feelings to his new friends were doomed to change a little that afternoon. Beryl was a very amusing companion, certainly—bright and merry and sweet-tempered, except when some little thing put her out for a minute or two, but it was to Santa he gave his greatest admiration and devotion.

By this time they were in the schoolroom, which was still in a sort of chaos.

'Oh dear!' said Santa, with a sigh, 'it isn't a very great treat for you, Willie, to help us to tidy our things, but we must begin them this afternoon,

and you see nobody but ourselves can do our books and ornaments properly.'

'Dr Pe—eebles,' said Beryl, 'was sure you'd like doing it.'

'So I shall,' said Willie heartily. 'I like settling things and arranging them. If you want any nails knocking in, I've got a beautiful tool-box at home, with everything in it. Papa gave it me my last birthday. Shall I fetch it?'

'I think we'd better fix first how we're going to have the things,' said Santa. 'The book-cupboards are all ready, fortunately, and when we get them filled, we can settle about the ornaments.'

The book-cupboards, as Santa called them, were charming—shallow recesses in the wall, just the right size for showing off pretty volumes or ornaments, with glass doors; the sort of cupboards one never finds except in very old houses of a certain date. Once the children's belongings were unpacked and dusted, it was a real pleasure to put them in their places, and Willie proved himself so

quick and handy, and with such a good eye—he showed, too, such great interest in the whole affair—that the work went on in a most satisfactory and cheerful way, and, at the end of an hour or so, the schoolroom began to look a very different place.

'Really,' said Santa, 'how beautifully we 've got on. You *are* a help, Willie.'

Willie grew rosy with pleasure.

'Yes,' Beryl agreed; 'and we haven't quarrelled one bit about it, have we, Santa? If you hadn't been here, Willie, we 'd have been half the time arguing about where we should put things, and which belonged to Santa and which to me, and they 'd have all been lying on the floor still.'

Willie opened his mouth, but on second thoughts shut it up again.

'What were you going to say?' asked Beryl. 'I wish you 'd say it, whatever it was. I don't like people to think over that they 'd better not say things, for I always bump out whatever 's in my head.'

'It was only,' said Willie, thus adjured, 'that—are you in earnest about quarrelling? You don't *really*, do you?'

'Oh yes, we do,' said Beryl calmly; 'all sisters and brothers do! But we love each other dreadfully all the same, of course.'

Willie's face expressed a good deal of perplexity, but there was no time to go further into the question, for at that moment Nesbitt opened the door, to tell the children that tea was ready, and waiting in the dining-room.

'Oh, how glad I am!' said Beryl. 'I'm perfectly starving!'

'You always are!' said Santa. 'The air of Market-St-Cross seems to agree with you; well, I suppose it agrees with me too, for I'm pretty hungry.'

The dining-room was a long room looking on to the garden, on the farther side from Willie's house. It ended in a large round, in which were three windows. The room over it on the first floor was the same shape, and was intended for

the drawing-room, though not yet properly furnished.

Willie looked round with interest.

'I've not been in this room,' he said, 'since my birthday, two years ago, when Mr Rotherby sent for me to give me a present. He was at dessert, and he gave me a pear and some port wine. It made me rather ill,' Willie went on gravely, 'but papa didn't tell him, because he was a very kind old man.'

'What was the present?' asked Santa.

'Ten shillings,' Willie replied. 'Gold, you know.'

'How nice!' said Beryl. 'Uncle Arty once gave me a pound on Christmas.'

Then for a little while the conversation subsided, as the children were fully occupied with Françoise's 'brioches,' and other good things.

'What delicious cakes these are!' said Willie, who was becoming quite at home. 'I never tasted them before. They are *something* like sponge-cake, only not sweet.'

'Have some apricot-jam with them,' said Santa hospitably. 'It's very good; it comes from Clynes.'

'Clynes!' repeated Willie, opening his eyes. 'There's a place near here called that—Clynes Chase—a very grand castle, but the man it belongs to hardly ever comes there. Doesn't it seem a pity?'

'He can't,' said Santa; 'he's had such lots of other things to do, but he's going to come before long. He's our uncle.'

'Is he?' said Willie, very much interested. 'Do you think some day he'd let me go and see the gardens?'

'Of course,' said Beryl. 'You'd only have to say you were a friend of ours, and they'd let you in in a minute.'

'I don't know, Beryl,' said Santa, 'that that would quite do. It would be better if we were all to go together, some day. We must ask mamma about it, when it won't tire her.'

'Bother!' said Beryl; 'everything has to wait

for mamma's getting better now. You needn't look shocked, Santa; it would be just as nice for poor mamma as for everybody else for her to get better. I'm saying bother to her being ill, not to *her*.'

'I should hope not, indeed,' said Santa rather gravely. 'Now you two can do whatever you like to amuse yourselves till Willie has to go home. I'm going to sit with mamma for half an hour.'

'Then you don't want to finish the school-room to-night?' said Beryl.

'No, I think we'd be fresher in the morning,' answered Santa.

'I can't come in the morning,' said Willie, 'and you do want me to nail up some things, don't you?'

Santa considered. 'I'll tell you what we'll do,' she said. 'I'll send you a little note to ask you to come. We couldn't have any knocking if mamma's head was very bad, you see.'

She had another reason, which she could not

have told Willie, for waiting a little before fixing for another visit from him. Her mother had trusted her—and Santa had plenty of good judgment and good sense—to form her opinion of the boy, especially as a companion for Beryl, and had told her to make no more plans for meeting till they had talked it over; for, though Dr Peebles had frankly explained the whole circumstances to Mrs Ross, he was not the sort of man to praise his own child.

'Well,' said her mother, as Santa entered the room, 'how have you got on? Have you had a pleasant afternoon.'

'Very,' the little girl replied heartily. 'He is really a *nice* boy, mamma—a very nice boy! Not a bit rough and yet not babyish. One of the packing-cases thumped down on his hand, and it must have hurt a good deal, but he just shook it, and said it was nothing. He's not the very least'—— and she hesitated a little. 'I don't quite like to say it, it doesn't seem kind—but he's not the very least *common*.'

'And yet,' said Mrs Ross, 'his father told me he had been obliged to leave him a great deal with servants, poor child! but I am glad you like him. It will be a good thing for Beryl.'

'We both like him,' said Santa; 'he's very sensible to talk to. I'm sure he's read a lot of nice books, and he's very clever at doing things, mamma. He's going to bring his tool-box to hang up some of our pictures and things, if you don't mind, and a few little ornaments have got broken too, and he says he can mend them.'

'That will be very nice,' said Mrs Ross. 'If I'm pretty well to-morrow you might bring him to see me for a minute. Your uncle will be pleased to hear about him; he and Hugh Peebles were such great friends long ago. She gave a little sigh, as she recalled happy old days, when sorrow, and separation, and death had seemed far from them all.

So the next morning brought Willie a little note from 'the princess,' as he still secretly

called Santa in his thoughts, asking him to come in again that afternoon.

The evening before, he had had a talk with his father. It began with Dr Peebles asking him—almost as Mrs Ross had asked Santa—how he had 'got on' with his new friends.

'I was awfully happy,' said Willie in his quiet way. 'May I go again, papa, if they ask me?'

'Certainly,' said Dr Peebles, well pleased to see the bright look on the little face he loved so well. 'I had a talk with Mrs Ross to-day,' he went on, 'and I want to explain to you rather more fully why they wish to live so very quietly just now, and not to be troubled with visitors or anything of that kind. Mrs Ross's bad illness has left her eyes in a critical state —nothing but perfect quiet will restore them altogether. Her brother, Lord Clynes, arranged for her coming down here to be under my care, till Mr Ross's return from China, but if it was known in this gossiping little place that she

was the sister of the owner of Clynes Chase'—and Dr Peebles smiled—'I daresay even you, Willie, can understand that people would make a great fuss about them, and all the good of her coming here would be lost.'

'The Miss Perfects would be always teasing,' said Willie sagely, 'and Mabel would want to play with Santa and Beryl. Oh papa, it would so spoil it.'

'Yes, but you see there are much more serious reasons for not talking about the Rosses,' said his father, 'and, now that you understand about it, I am sure you will be very careful. I have spoken to you as if you were really big and sensible, almost grown-up, indeed, Willie.'

'Yes, thank you, papa,' the boy replied, feeling very proud and gratified. 'I will truly do just as you want me, and I'll take care never to be a trouble to them. I do hope their mother will soon get better.'—'It must be very nice to have a mother, I suppose,' he thought to himself, as he fell asleep that night.

CHAPTER X.

THE QUEST OF THE WHITE HYACINTH.

WILLIE did not see Mrs Ross the next day, rather to his disappointment, for the more he was with Santa and Beryl, and heard their constant talk of her, the better he began to understand what a delightful thing such a mother must be. But, unfortunately, Mrs Ross's health did not improve as quickly as they had hoped. There were days on which Dr Peebles looked very grave when Willie asked him for news of 'their mamma'—days on which any boy a degree less quiet and thoughtful than Willie could not have been admitted into the house next door.

Once or twice—greatly to Willie's delight—the little girls, by way of variety, came to have tea with him, and you can imagine how important

he felt as their host, and how much more cheerful these tea-parties were than those at which he had entertained the little Selbys or Mabel Perfect! But it was not often that his neighbours could visit Willie, for the later part of the afternoon was generally the time at which Mrs Ross liked to have Santa with her, to talk over things, and sometimes write for her, and it would have been 'too dull,' both Beryl and Willie agreed, for poor Santa to have tea all alone.

The weather continued chilly and damp, very little gardening was possible, and even long walks were out of the question; nevertheless, in spite of all these drawbacks, the three little friends found the time pass quickly. Except for the anxiety about their mother, Santa and Beryl found life at Market-St-Cross much more interesting than they had expected, and, as for Willie, he had never been so happy in his life.

And, after all, it was not perhaps so much anxiety as disappointment that their mother

did not get well more quickly. The great doctor came down from London at last, and gave a cheering report, which pleased Dr Peebles very much. The weather began to grow brighter, too, and the children's hopes turned to their mother's birthday, which was in the middle of April, as a date by which she might be really like herself again.

By this time, of course, Willie had seen Mrs Ross more than once, though only for a few minutes together, but her sweet face and voice had quite gained his heart, and he joined eagerly in the sisters' plans for the eighteenth of April.

'We must have some nice flowers,' said Beryl. 'I'm afraid it will be too early to have anything much in the garden.'

'I don't know,' said Willie; 'the bulbs are beginning to come up, especially in that bed in front of your mamma's sitting-room. If we had a few in pots, already in flower, they'd look very pretty set out at the top of the steps, in those old flower-boxes.'

'What a good idea!' said Santa. 'Oh Willie, if it would but get fine, so that we could go to Clynes some day, I'm sure the gardener there would give us something nice.'

And the very next day the weather did grow fine, so that Willie was able to consult his father about their proposed expedition.

Dr Peebles was very kind about it, and talked it over with Mrs Ross, without letting her know the children's great reason for wanting to go to the Chase; and a day or two afterwards the children set off under Nesbitt's escort for their long walk.

It was not a day on which the house and grounds were open to the public, but the housekeeper had been written to and was expecting them.

'You will have tea at Clynes,' Mrs Ross said to Santa—'an early tea, for I should like you to be home by six o'clock. You won't be able to show Willie everything to-day, but that won't signify, for, once your uncle is at home, and

I am well again, you will often be able to go over there for an afternoon.'

'It's the gardens we want to see mostly,' said Santa.

'Yes,' added Beryl, 'there are heaps of things we want to ask the gardener about. We are going to make our gardens quite beautiful, mamma. Willie has all sorts of plans.'

The walk was very pleasant; they went along Ferney Stroll, past the turning Willie knew well which led up to the Knoll, till some little way farther on they emerged on to the high-road. Half a mile or so farther brought them to the big gates of Clynes, and through them into the long avenue of trees leading up to the house.

'We won't go in at the big front door,' said Santa. 'When uncle's away it isn't often opened; the side door is near Mrs Brown's rooms, and I daresay we'll have tea with her. She's a very nice old woman.'

And so she was, though she would hardly have liked Santa's description of her, for in

comparison with his old nurse, she seemed to Willie quite young, and very much grander than he had expected. She made a great deal of Santa and Beryl, and seemed very pleased to see Willie also, for she knew Dr Peebles; and she showed her kind feelings in the most practical way to them all, by giving them a most delicious tea, which they were very glad of after their walk.

There was not time for them to do more than glance at a few of the principal rooms, which Santa and Beryl had of course seen already.

'But it won't matter,' they said to Willie; 'once uncle is home, and mamma quite well, we 'll come here often—won't we, Mrs Brown?'

'Indeed, I hope so, my dears,' the housekeeper replied. 'I 'm getting very tired indeed of this great shut-up house, with none of the family in it, and the late lord's long illness makes it seem as if things were never to be cheerful again at the Chase.'

'Oh, but they will be,' said Beryl, 'you 'll see,

Mrs Brown. Uncle will be coming soon, and mamma's getting so much better.'

'She says no one has ever done her so much good as Willie's father,' added Santa, which made Willie's cheeks rosy with pride and pleasure. 'Do you know, Mrs Brown, we are really beginning to hope,' she went on, 'that by her birthday, the week after next, mamma will be nearly quite well, and able to come down and have tea with us, in her own sitting-room. And that's why we want so much to make the garden pretty.'

'Oh! I was forgetting,' said Mrs Brown. 'Mr Newsome, the head-gardener, wished me to say he was very sorry he had to be away to-day, but he left word with the second gardener to attend to whatever you young ladies wanted. He'll be in the houses now; shall I show you the way?'

Smith, the gardener in question, was very civil and obliging, and very patient with the children's many questions and requests. He gave them a nice packet of seeds, and promised to send a basket full of crocuses and tulips in flower, a day

IN THE GREENHOUSE.

or two before Mrs Ross's birthday, to fill the boxes outside her sitting-room door.

He showed the children several of the houses, where there was already a good show. They admired all the flowers, but the little girls were especially pleased with the thoroughly English ones, which were more of a novelty to them than many of the brilliant foreign plants. In one house there were some beautiful hyacinths coming on.

'Oh!' said Beryl, at a standstill in front of them, and drawing a deep breath, 'what lovely flowers, like lots and lots of little bells; I forget their name. That white one is the most beautiful of all; *do* you think we could have it for mamma's birthday—to stand in her room, you know, not for outside?'

'And,' said Santa, 'we might get one of those pretty flower-pot covers; that would be a nice little present besides the book we got.'

'That hyacinth will be over by the 17th,' said Smith, 'but there'll be others coming on quite as

fine. 'I'll speak of it to Mr Newsome, if you like, miss, and I've no doubt he'll be pleased to send you one with the other things.'

Beryl gave one of her skips of delight, more by good fortune than good management escaping the overthrow of any flower-pots.

'Oh!' she said, 'that will be beautiful! We'll get the flower-pot cover, and have it all ready—and you'll be sure to send a white one, won't you?' she added, turning to the gardener.

'Yes, miss; I'll tell Mr Newsome.'

And their good spirits still further increased by this promise, the children said 'good-bye' to Mrs Brown, and set off on their walk home.

The next week or two continued fine and spring-like. Between their gardens, and long walks in the afternoons, and plenty of things still to arrange in the house, there was no lack of occupation for the little sisters, even though, as yet, nothing had been settled as to their going on with their lessons again.

'We're to have a governess after Easter, or at

least soon,' said Beryl, rather dolefully, 'so we have to make the most of our time now. I think mamma might have given us a holiday till the summer; we've been doing lessons and having governesses all our lives. I wish you had been having a holiday just now, too, Willie. Don't you think your papa will let you have one on mamma's birthday?'

'I daresay he would,' said Willie. 'I'll ask him. Let me see; it will be—when?—next Thursday?'

'Yes,' Santa replied; 'and on Wednesday the flowers will be coming from Clynes. I hope they'll send them quite early, as they promised, so that we can put them all in order that day, even though mamma won't come down till the afternoon of her birthday.'

They were doomed to some disappointment. It was not till rather late on the Wednesday afternoon, and not till the children had begun to fear that the promise had been forgotten altogether, that a large open box filled with

flower-pots was left at the house by the spring-cart from the Chase.

The boy driving the cart did not wait to see if all was right, and, at first sight of the bright assemblage of tulips and crocuses in the hall, there was nothing but exclamations of delight that the plants had come at last. But a little further investigation called forth a cry of distress.

'Oh, Santa!' said Beryl, 'they've forgotten the beautiful flower with white bells—what do you call it?'

'The hyacinth,' said Santa. 'Oh dear! have they really? Oh what a pity! Can't we do anything about it?'

'Shall I run and ask Fletcher?' asked Beryl eagerly; but she came back in a minute or two, her eyes filled with tears.

'No,' she said, swallowing down a sob of disappointment. 'Fletcher says there's nothing to be done—she's so stupid,' she went on; 'she says mamma will like it just as well another day, and of course she won't. Another day won't be

her birthday, and we 've got the flower-pot cover all ready;' and at this last thought the tears began to run down her cheeks.

Santa looked nearly as distressed, and Willie's profound sympathy showed itself in his grave face and knitted brows.

'It 's nearly three o'clock,' he said at last. 'I could get there in an hour, and I know exactly which of the houses the hyacinths were in, and Smith 's sure to be there. Yes; I 'm sure I could do it, and be back by half-past five. I don't need to be home till six for my lessons.'

'But the filling the boxes with the other flowers?' said Beryl. 'You were going to help us with them, Willie.'

'We can do them to-morrow morning,' said Willie. 'You know I 'm to have a whole holiday; that 's why I want to get my lessons done to-night, so as to have none at all to think of to-morrow. But if I 'm going, I must be quick.'

'But, Willie,' said Santa hesitatingly, 'are you sure you should go, and all that way alone?'

'Of course I can,' said Willie. 'If I went home to explain about it, it would make it far too late. Papa wouldn't mind; he doesn't want me to be a baby. Betsy used to go out with me only because it's so dull to go alone, and she never does now scarcely.'

'Because you've us,' said Santa; 'and then, it's not been weather for walks till lately.'

'I know the way quite well,' said Willie, Santa's misgivings only making him the more determined to stifle his own; for he knew that he would have been doing better to have gone home first and consulted Mrs Groomridge before setting off to the Chase in this independent fashion.

His apparent confidence reassured Santa. As for Beryl, she was so eager about the hyacinth, that she did not trouble her head much as to Willie's part in the affair.

'You'll carry it very carefully,' she said. 'I should think Smith would put a paper round it; be sure you ask him to, for fear it should blow about on the way.'

'And you think you'll be back about half-past five?' said Santa, anxiously still. 'We shall be so glad to see you. Shall we keep some tea for you?'

'Yes,' said Willie, 'perhaps it would be as well, as they're not expecting me home for tea.'

He spoke in rather a 'big man' tone not usual to him, which was, to tell the truth, put on to hide his real nervousness; for, after all, it must be remembered that he was only ten years old, and in certain ways very unaccustomed to much that is 'matter-of-course' to most boys of his age, though I want it to be thoroughly understood that there was no want of courage or resolution about the little fellow, delicate as he was.

Once outside and started on his journey, Willie's spirits rose. There was a nice fresh wind blowing, and just enough sunshine now and then to brighten up things in general. It was delightful to the boy to know that he was really doing a service to his friends, and there was something inspiriting, too, in the feeling of being out on his

own account, with no one to direct or interfere with him. He felt inclined to run, but he soon sobered down into walking at a steady pace, for he had plenty of common sense, and knew that if he tired himself out at first, the three miles there and three back would prove a trying business.

As it was, he began to feel a little done up as he entered upon the last mile or so of his journey, and, as a light cart passed him, he looked up with a half hope that it might be driven by some one he knew, whom he could ask for a lift; but the driver's face was strange to him. It was, in fact, the very cart from Clynes which had brought the flowers that afternoon, and if only Willie had known it, or had had the courage to call to the boy-driver, and explain his errand, the story of the white hyacinth would have been a very different one from that which I have to tell you in the next chapter.

CHAPTER XI.

POOR 'LADY LILIAN.'

AS ill luck would have it—though, indeed, seeming ill luck oftener turns into good fortune than we are grateful enough to acknowledge—the afternoon of Willie's expedition was that of a 'show-day'—a day, I mean, on which the house and grounds were open to the public at Clynes Chase.

It was a very favourite resort for the inhabitants of Market-St-Cross on these occasions, and among the visitors few were more frequent than the Misses Perfect. They knew the furniture of the principal rooms almost as well as Mrs Brown herself—very much better, I am quite sure, than Lord Clynes did. Indeed, they had been there so often that they had come to feel a sort of

possession in the place, spoke to the housekeeper and the other head-servants with condescending amiability, and were even heard to complain sometimes of the annoyance of 'the crowds of visitors.'

To-day they had a special reason for their expedition. There was to be a show of spring flowers that week at some little distance off, at which the Clynes gardens were to be well represented, and it had oozed out that the plants intended for the show were all to be seen together in one of the houses. Miss Maria, who was the gardener of the family, had set her heart on seeing them, and about half an hour before Willie arrived at the Chase, the Perfect ladies and their niece might have been seen among the visitors crowding round Newsome's really beautiful specimens.

'Let us take a turn round outside,' said Miss Sophia, 'before we go. We can have another look at the show flowers later on if you wish, Maria.'

'It may be pleasanter by then,' said Miss Maria, agreeing to her sister's proposal. 'It is disagreeable among so many sightseers. I must say I hope these show-days will be put a stop to when Lord Clynes returns for good.'

'How should we ever get here then, Aunt Maria?' inquired Mabel; but to this Miss Maria did not condescend to reply.

'Shall we look in to see Mrs Brown?' said Miss Sophia. 'She might be hurt if she heard we'd been here without seeing her.'

'Nonsense!' said Miss Maria snappishly, 'you 're far too familiar with Mrs Brown, Sophia;' and Miss Sophia, who was really, as they all were, very much in awe of her younger sister, did not press the point.

So they contented themselves with a turn round the kitchen garden, which was at some little distance. As they were returning towards the front, Mabel, whose eyes were very quick, suddenly started.

'I declare!' she exclaimed. 'Aunt Sophia, just

look over there. Do you see *there* in that path leading from the avenue'——

'What?' said Miss Sophia eagerly. 'I don't see any one except a—a boy, or a child—no, he's out of sight now.'

'That's just it,' said Mabel. 'I'm almost sure it's Willie Peebles!'

'You don't say so,' said Miss Sophia, while even Miss Maria condescended to peer in the direction pointed out.

'You must be mistaken, Mabel,' she said; 'he would never be here alone.'

'Shall I run on and see if it is him,' said Mabel. 'I know where that path comes out. I'm almost sure it was he;' and off she set.

She was back again in a few minutes, breathless, but triumphant.

'Yes,' she said, 'it was him! I called out to him. He was hurrying along and looked very red, as if he didn't want to be seen. He heard me quite well, I'm sure, but he only ran off all the faster—rude boy that he is!'

Her aunts looked at each other.

'I am afraid that he is getting into really naughty ways,' said Miss Sophia. 'It is very sad! His father shouldn't let him be with those foreign children, whom no one knows anything about. But of course, after that extraordinary letter, we cannot interfere, even for the poor child's own good.'

'The letter was entirely caused by the boy's tale-telling and mis-statements,' said Miss Maria vindictively. 'It would be a very good thing if Dr Peebles's eyes were opened once for all.'

As we know, Mabel's eyes had not deceived her. Willie indeed it was, as large, or rather as small, as life, whom they had caught sight of and made sure of, when she had run after him. And he had seen her too—a most unwelcome vision; though, till he heard her calling his name, he hoped to get off unperceived.

'They 'll be calling me rude again for running away,' he said to himself as he hurried on breathlessly in the direction of the houses.

'Oh, if only I could get the hyacinth at once without meeting any one, what a good thing it would be!' was his next reflection. 'I know exactly where they were standing—it was in quite a little hothouse. If I could but find that nice gardener we saw the other day!'

Two or three minutes brought him in view of the glass-houses. He had reached them, thanks to the fright Mabel had given him, by a back approach. He had to stand and look about him for a little before feeling sure where he was. But he had a good memory, and was naturally quick at finding his way.

'Yes,' he decided, 'it's over there, one of those little houses at the side of the big ones in the middle;' and thither he directed his steps.

He was not mistaken, though he opened two or three doors before he hit upon the right place. There they stood, the nursling hyacinths and tulips of various kinds, just as he remembered them, though probably none of the same individual plants as those he and his little friends

had seen there a fortnight before; for those now in their prime had been moved into the great central house facing the lawn, there to be admired by the visitors on this especial show-day, before being carefully carted off early the next morning to the great spring flower exhibition I have mentioned.

To Willie's eyes, however, this small house looked much as it had done on his former visit. There were the little young plants in one corner, but on going nearer he caught sight of something which made him start. Among them was one magnificent flower in its full prime and glory—a white hyacinth, white as snow, regal in its dignity—more beautiful even than the one Beryl had so admired and longed for. And beside the little label stick which bore the special name of the lovely flower—'Lady Lilian'—was fastened a folded paper, on which was written in plain letters—

'For Miss Ross,
The Cross Houses, Market-St-Cross.'

Willie read it with great delight.

'That must be it,' he thought. 'Santa is "Miss Ross," of course, and the "Cross Houses" are ours and Mr Rotherby's, and Mrs Pigott's on the other side. It 's just been forgotten, for it wouldn't be standing about here, among these little ones, if they hadn't meant to send it away. Perhaps they 're meaning to send it still this evening, if they 've found out it hasn't gone, and it would save them trouble if I was to take it—if I could but catch that Smith!

He peered about, but no Smith was to be seen; unfortunately for Willie he was quite at the other end of the grounds. Newsome, the head-gardener, was at that moment in the large central house expatiating on some pet specimens destined for the flower-show, and listening with pride to the admiring remarks of the visitors. Newsome, it will be remembered, did not know Willie by sight.

Just then the little group round the gardener was joined again by Mabel Perfect and her aunts.

The elder ladies caught sight of some acquaintances, whom they immediately began to talk to: their niece, not finding this amusing, and having had enough of the flowers, which she did not much care for, began to look about for something to divert herself with.

A door in one corner stood half-open; it led into a narrow glazed passage, with peach-trees trained along the side. Mabel strolled to the end, and gave a glance through another doorway, into a smaller house, where there was nothing particular to be seen, and she was turning to go back again when something moving in one corner caught her eye. She looked again. It was the figure of a boy. Mabel, who was quick-witted, immediately remembered her vision of Willie Peebles in the shrubberies. She stood still, in the shelter of the half-open door, and watched him breathlessly.

'What can he be after?' she said to herself, and even she, spiteful and suspicious as she was, felt a thrill of really shocked surprise when she

saw that the boy, stooping on the ground, was busily employed in wrapping his handkerchief as well as he could round something high in a flower-pot—what, the girl could not distinctly see.

In a moment or two he stood up, the flower-pot in his arms, and glanced round him, as Mabel thought in guilty fear, and, seeing no one, turned to go.

'Oh! the horrid, mean little thief!' thought she. A more generous-natured child would have called out to Willie at once, but that was not Mabel's way. All her feelings of spite and resentment awoke. She fled back the way she had come, and burst into the central house, where her aunts and their friends were now the only remaining visitors, exclaiming in a tone of triumphant excitement—

'Aunt Maria! Aunt Sophia! come quick! tell the gardener! There's that boy *stealing*, actually *stealing* flowers—that's what he must have come for; no wonder he didn't want to be seen!'

Miss Sophia Perfect grew red, Miss Maria pale. Both gasped.

'Where, where is he?' said one or other—perhaps both. Newsome had heard Mabel's excited words and hurried forward.

'*Where,* miss?' he asked eagerly, though he had taken in nothing distinctly, except the announcement that there was a thief on the premises, somewhere.

'This way,' cried Mabel, 'quick, quick, or he'll have got off!' and she flew down the passage again, followed by Newsome and her aunts, their friends bringing up the rear.

The first two soon distanced the others, but when they entered the little house no one was to be seen.

'He was here,' gasped Mabel, 'in that corner—tying up—a tall flower in his handkerchief.'

The gardener threw a glance towards the spot she pointed out.

'The Lady Lilian!' he exclaimed. 'It was there an hour ago, I am quite sure. I was just

going to send it off to His Lordship's sister. There were some plants went to her this morning, and the white hyacinth was forgotten.'

'Oh!' ejaculated Mabel. 'That makes it worse! How vexed the lady will be!'

Newsome glanced at her sharply; he thought her remark uncalled for, but his irritation found vent against the unknown delinquent.

'The young rascal!' he muttered, and then he turned again to Mabel. 'Have you any idea which way he went, miss?' he said. 'We're losing time.'

'No,' said Mabel, 'I didn't stop to watch him.'

Newsome waited for no more, but hurried off by the opposite door to that by which they had come in. This led into another house, from which again two doors opened, the one on to the grounds, the other, through a narrow and dark passage—only used as a back entrance by the gardeners—into a large conservatory, communicating directly with the library of Clynes House.

Willie, conscience-clear, with no smallest intention or thought of concealing what he had done, was standing in the first house looking about him in hopes of seeing the friendly Smith, or some other gardener, to whom he could explain matters. Suddenly a gruff shout behind him made him turn round with a start. A big man, with a red angry face, was bearing down upon him.

'Stop there, you young rascal!' he cried furiously.

'He's out of his mind, or tipsy,' was Willie's first thought, and a natural impulse made him rush off, his principal idea the preservation of the precious burden he was carrying. 'If he knocks against me the flower will be broken,' he said to himself, and he flew down the little dark passage I have spoken of, slamming the door behind him as he went. The latch caught, and, happily for Willie, this delayed Newsome for half a second, thus giving the nimble child time to escape through the farther door into the

conservatory, and there turn the key in the lock, as it fortunately happened to be inside.

But even then he did not feel safe!

'He's such a big strong man,' he thought, 'he could easily knock in the door, or he may get round some other way;' and, as these ideas crossed his mind, a banging and shaking of the door in question, fortunately not a glass one, showed that the first of his fears was not unfounded.

Willie grew white with fear, and, considering all, I think it was no shame to him, but the more frightened he became, the more firmly he grasped the white hyacinth. Glancing across the conservatory, he caught sight of the library, for the door which led into it was standing open. This was an unexpected haven of refuge, and Willie fled to it joyfully.

'I'll hide the flower in a safe corner,' he decided. 'And then I'll try to find my way to Mrs Brown's room, and tell her about the dreadful man.'

But, alas! as he ran into the room a large bear-skin rug, with the former owner's shaggy head stuffed, and raised at one end, caught the boy's foot. He fell. A crash and a cry—a woful cry of distress and horror, and pain too.

'Oh, the hyacinth!—oh, what shall I do! Oh, my leg!'

For it was not only the hyacinth—though it looked miserable enough, poor thing, as it lay crushed and soiled on the ground—that had suffered in the catastrophe. Willie had fallen upon it, and a jagged edge of the broken flower-pot had cut his leg, but thinly protected by his stocking, and a little stream of blood was already flowing from the wound, the sight of which upset him far more than the pain he was actually suffering.

He glanced round him in a sort of despair.

'I can't go to look for Mrs Brown,' he thought. 'It would make my leg bleed ever so much more. And oh! to think of the hyacinth, and how Santa

and Beryl will be watching for me. I *don't* know what to do!'

He choked down a sob, for, through all his troubles the determination—which was perhaps one of the strongest feelings in his heart, because rooted in his deep love for his father—the determination 'not to be a baby' never for a moment failed him. But the blood continued to flow, and Willie began to feel very faint and weak, for, though the reverse of cowardly, he was an exceedingly nervous child.

But a sharp quick sound brought him back, almost, as it were, with a jerk, from the land of unconsciousness where he was drifting. It was the sound of the door opening.

'Why, what's the matter? Who's this?' exclaimed the new-comer, for Willie was in a very prominent position in the room—no one entering could possibly have avoided seeing him at once; and he certainly must have been as pitiable an object in his way as poor 'Lady Lilian' was in hers!

CHAPTER XII.

PEALS AT THE BELL.

THE new-comer was a tall man, with hair and eyes as dark as those of Santa and her mother. They were very kind eyes, with something in them that reminded Willie of his father's, though Dr Peebles's were gray blue.

These kind dark eyes bending over him were almost the only thing Willie was conscious of for some moments, for he was still dreadfully faint.

'What's the matter?' the voice repeated. 'What are you doing here, my boy?'

'I was going to Mrs Brown, and then I fell and cut my leg, and it's bleeding so,' said Willie.

The mention of Mrs Brown was about the best thing he could have said, though he did

it unconsciously, in guarantee of his respectability. Lord Clynes—for he it was, as he had unexpectedly arrived at the Chase that very morning—immediately supposed that Willie was a nephew or grandson perhaps, of the old housekeeper, though something in the boy's face and expression struck him even then as familiar.

'Who is it he's like?' he thought to himself. 'Let's have a look at your leg,' he added aloud. 'I say, it is a nasty cut! What did you do it with? Oh! I see—that flower-pot—and what were you doing with the flower-pot? But, no—don't speak just yet; we'll have it explained afterwards,' he went on, as Willie was beginning feebly and confusedly to say something of the man who had frightened him, the flower for the birthday, &c.

He was glad to be silent and to resign himself to his new friend, who bound up his wound in a rough-and-ready but skilful enough fashion, with his own pocket-handkerchief. Then, lifting him in his arms, he carried him off to Mrs Brown, just

as Newsome was entering the house by the back, with the clever intention of intercepting the suspected thief in or near the library; for the gardener knew that the boy could not escape by any other way.

The Misses Perfect, all three of them, had been quite distanced in the race, and inclined to resent Newsome's abrupt manner.

'He should have come back to tell us if he'd caught the boy,' said Miss Maria. 'That's all the thanks one gets!'

'There was no need to thank you, Aunt Maria,' said Mabel. 'It was me that saw Willie, both times.'

'On the whole,' said Miss Sophia, 'I think the best thing we can do is to hurry back and warn poor Dr Peebles about this sad affair. He is generally in at this time of day, and, of course, if he makes a great favour of it, we must promise not to expose Willie, though it is really what he deserves.'

So it was decided, and the trio set off.

'I 'll thank you, Mabel,' said Miss Maria sharply to her niece, 'to hold your tongue when we see Dr Peebles, till you 're spoken to. Any one would think you 'd a spite at the boy, you seem so eager about it.'

'I 'm not nearly as spiteful as you are,' was Mabel's respectful reply. 'Ever since Dr Peebles wrote you that letter you 've disliked Willie, and so have I. I don't pretend I haven't, and I 'd love to see him well put down.'

It was some little time before the good ladies were fairly under weigh, in spite of Miss Sophia's talk of hurrying home, for they first hunted through the conservatories again in hopes of finding their friends, and relating to them the terrible discovery they had made. But the friends had disappeared.

Then ensued a discussion as to the quickest way back, the result being that they chose a short cut, which, as is said to be usually the way with short cuts, brought them out on to the road, after a wearisome round and innumerable stiles, at a

point which they certainly would have reached a quarter of an hour sooner if they had not deserted the Queen's highway at all.

Mabel and Miss Maria had safely descended on the other side of the last stile, and Miss Sophia was gaspingly following them, when an exclamation from her sister nearly startled her into falling headlong on to the road. A dog-cart had just driven rapidly past.

'Good gracious!' ejaculated Miss Maria, while Mabel stood by staring with her mouth wide open.

'Is it a horse running away? Whatever is the matter?' asked Miss Sophia breathlessly.

'Didn't you see?' said Mabel. 'It's him—Willie Peebles—they 've caught him.'

'They must be taking him straight to the police-office, I'm afraid,' said Miss Maria. 'There were two men in the dog-cart.'

'One was a groom,' put in Mabel, 'and the other was a big dark man. I wonder who he could be.'

'Wasn't it Newsome?' said Miss Sophia.

'Of course not,' said Mabel. 'Newsome has light hair and a red face. Could it be a detective?' she added in an awe-struck voice.

'Nonsense, child!' said Miss Maria. 'What would be the use of a detective when they had actually seen him with the flower, and how could they have got a detective in such a hurry?'

'The flower was there, too!' said Mabel. 'Didn't you see it?—Willie was holding it himself in his arms.'

'Dear, dear!' said Miss Maria. 'That sounds worse and worse, as if there was to be a regular *exposé* of the affair! Fancy driving the boy through the town like that.'

'Poor Dr Peebles!' said Miss Sophia; 'but we must be quick if we are to get there before the news of the boy's being taken to the police-station reaches him.'

Two or three minutes more brought them to the Cross Houses. All was quiet there to outward appearance; in point of fact, the Clynes

dog-cart had driven on to the post-office to call for the afternoon letters, after depositing two of its occupants at Dr Peebles' door. But this the Misses Perfect were very far from suspecting.

And now perhaps, in order to understand the whole position of affairs quite clearly, we had better go back a little to the earlier part of the afternoon, when we left Santa and Beryl, eager, yet a little anxious, about Willie's daring expedition in quest of the much-coveted hyacinth.

They watched him from a window as far as they could see along the street; then Santa turned back into the room again with a little sigh.

'It's really very good of him,' she said. 'I do hope it will be all right. I do hope it wasn't wrong to let him go.'

'Of course not,' said Beryl. 'It's nothing of a walk for a great big boy.'

'But Willie isn't a great big boy,' said Santa; 'that's just it, though he's certainly not babyish

or cowardly. I wonder if it would have been better for him to run in home first and tell Mrs Groomridge.'

'How you do fidget!' said Beryl. 'It's too late to think of all that now. Fancy how nice it will be to have the hyacinth after all, and how proud Willie will be when we tell mamma he fetched it. Why can't you think of nice things, instead of fancying everything will go wrong?'

'It's because,' said Santa slowly, 'I'm not sure if I've done right in letting him go.'

'Let's get something to do,' said Beryl sensibly, 'to "take your mind off," as Nesbitt says.'

'I may as well begin my letter to papa, I daresay,' said Santa; 'he'll like to know what we've done for mamma's birthday.'

She got out her writing things, and sat down at the table, for they were in the schoolroom, but the letter did not proceed very rapidly. Santa had fits of brown study every now and then, and from time to time she glanced at the clock,

ticking away with the calm regularity which is so provoking in clocks when one is anxious and fidgety.

'He 'll be half-way there by now,' or 'Surely he 'll be quite there by now,' she said to herself as the quarters turned into half-hours, and the half-hours gradually reached a whole one.

Five minutes more passed, when suddenly there came a sharp loud ring at the front-door bell, such a ring as makes people start in a quiet sleepy place like Market-St-Cross, though in London it would seem nothing.

'Beryl,' said Santa, 'what can that be? Oh dear! can anything have happened to Willie?' and she grew pale at the mere idea.

'Nonsense!' said Beryl. 'You 're too fanciful, Santa;' though, to tell the truth, she was a little frightened herself. 'Perhaps it 's Dr Peebles.'

'I 'm sure I hope it isn't,' said Santa, but Beryl did not hear her. She had already run out of the room, and in a moment or two she came back with an orange-coloured envelope in her hand.

'I met Nesbitt on the stairs,' she said, 'and I made her give me this. Look, Santa, it's addressed "*Miss* Ross."'

Both little girls looked frightened now.

'Can it be anything the matter with papa?' was their first thought, as Santa tore it open; but no.

'It's from uncle,' she said in a tone of relief. 'He's sent it off from Barnes station, you see' —for there were two stations by which one could reach Clynes Chase—'and he's sent it to me not to startle mamma—"Arrived unexpectedly, tell your mother; will see her this evening."'

'How nice!' said Beryl. 'He'll be here for her birthday.'

'And he's put in "all well" at the end, just for fear we should think there was anything wrong with papa. Uncle is always so thoughtful.'

'Dear Uncle Arty,' said Beryl. 'I wonder if mamma is awake. Is it still the time for her afternoon sleep, Santa?'

Santa looked at the clock.

'It 's too early for us to go in to see her, but it 's long past our tea-time. I asked Nesbitt to wait for Willie, but I 'm afraid we shall have to begin if he doesn't come soon.'

'It 's all ready in the dining-room,' said Beryl. 'I saw it when I ran down just now. I do wish Willie would come. And, oh! Santa,' she went on, 'mamma's boudoir is in such a mess! We 've forgotten all about it since we arranged the flowers.'

'Mamma won't be down there till to-morrow,' said Santa calmly. 'The servants will put it all right before then.'

'But when uncle comes this evening,' said Beryl, 'he 'll have to go in there.'

This was true. But Santa's head was so full of her anxiety about Willie, she scarcely seemed able to take in any other ideas.

'We 'd better tell Nesbitt about the telegram,' she said, 'and that 'll make her be in a good humour about the boudoir.'

So they ran down-stairs. The great news, as

Santa expected, put the whole household into a state of pleasant excitement, and made Nesbitt forget about the children's tea being so late. But as the minutes went on, till long past the furthest time at which they had looked for Willie's return, Santa's heart grew heavier and heavier.

'Your mamma is having her tea now,' said Nesbitt. 'Hadn't you better go up, Miss Santa, and show her the telegram? It might startle her to see his lordship all of a sudden.'

'I'd rather you'd tell mamma,' answered Santa. 'Say we'll come up after tea.'

'You don't mean, miss, that you've not had your tea yet!' exclaimed the maid. 'If you've been waiting for Master Willie, it's no use. I saw him go out up the road, but he must have gone home ever so long ago; he's never allowed out so late.'

Santa's lips opened with a half intention of confiding her anxieties to some one able to advise, but before she had time to say anything, again

there came an unusually loud peal at the front bell. Santa started—they were standing in the hall.

'What can that be?' she exclaimed, looking up at Nesbitt with frightened eyes.

'It sounds like another telegram,' said the maid, and, in her eagerness, she went forward to answer the summons herself.

'It can't be Uncle Arty *yet!*' said Beryl.

'If only it's nothing wrong with Willie,' half whispered Santa.

But it was none of these things.

When the door was opened there stood Dr Peebles himself. He hurried in, and seemed pleased to catch sight of the children.

'I have come for Willie,' he said. 'He is with you, I suppose, but he should have come home before this. He knew I wanted him. By the bye, I'm afraid I rang the bell very loudly. I hope it didn't startle Mrs Ross? Will you kindly call Willie?'

'Will you come in for a moment, and I will

explain,' said Santa, and Dr Peebles followed her into the dining-room, a little surprised, but, till he saw the child's face, in no way uneasy. But Santa's face was startling; she was very pale, and it was with difficulty she kept back her tears.

'It's all my fault for letting him go, and I'm so miserable,' she said. 'Dr Peebles, Willie isn't here, and—oh, *can* anything have happened to him?'

At this Dr Peebles' own face grew grave. He controlled himself, however, though it took some patience to get the whole story from Santa, who seemed by this time, rare as it was for her to be so agitated, in danger of breaking down altogether. But in a minute or two he was in possession of all the facts, and then, to Santa's relief, he smiled reassuringly.

'No harm can have happened to him, my dear child,' he said kindly; 'at least I really don't think we need be frightened, though he certainly would have done better to come home and consult

Mrs Groomridge first, for you see, with his being so del'——

Another peal at the bell! Dr Peebles himself started this time, and Santa's face grew frightened again—when in a moment Beryl appeared.

'Santa,' she exclaimed, 'I was watching for Willie out of the pantry window—it sees the farthest down the road, you know—and I saw a dog-cart coming along very fast, and it stopped here, and there 's Willie in it and the hyacinth; but there 's a man in it too, rather like'——

It was well she had prepared them a little, otherwise both Santa and Willie's father might have been more frightened than they were, when, on hurrying into the hall, they were met by Lord Clynes himself, carrying Willie, while Willie tightly embraced another 'Lady Lilian.'

'*Arthur!*' exclaimed the doctor. 'What—how are you here?' for in Santa's overwhelming anxiety about Willie she had entirely forgotten to tell his father of her uncle's telegram.

'Is there anything wrong with Willie?' he went

on hurriedly, though Willie's smiling face might have reassured him.

'No, no, papa; only a little cut in my leg. But it's all right again. I can walk. Please put me down, and thank you so much,' he said, looking up gratefully in Lord Clynes's face. 'I've the flower, Santa—at least, not *it*, but one just the same, so it'll be in time for to-morrow.'

Then everybody began explaining everything, but as every one knew a bit of what had happened, it did not take so very long after all.

'I think I had better go up to see Mrs Ross and prepare her for this unexpected arrival,' said Dr Peebles in a few minutes. 'She will be so delighted; but sudden delight is sometimes dangerous, so we must be careful.'

'She will be delighted at more than my return,' said Lord Clynes in a low voice. 'I know that it will give her the keenest pleasure to hear that we have met again, old fellow, after all these years, and—met again as of yore? I may say so, may I not?'

For half a second Dr Peebles hesitated; then he held out his hand, and Lord Clynes clasped it warmly.

'Yes,' said Willie's father, 'as of yore.'

For though it would take too long to explain the whole, I may tell you, children, that these two old friends had been parted for years in a sadder way than by time and distance. They had misunderstood and blamed each other, for such things are possible among the best of us. But now all was to be forgiven and forgotten; perhaps, indeed, it would prove that there was much less to forgive and forget than had appeared the case.

So all seemed ending like a fairy tale, when —*again* that angry door-bell—angrier than ever!

'It will startle mamma,' said Santa, darting forward, but Dr Peebles was before her.

'Go into the dining-room,' he said to the group still in the hall. 'I will see what it is. It is probably a summons for me.'

He opened the door. Three figures were on the step.

'Oh, Dr Peebles!' exclaimed two of the new-comers, speaking at once; 'so thankful to find you here. We have been at your house.'

'Indeed,' said the doctor quietly. 'What is the matter? Is Miss Perfect ill?'

'No, no; far worse than that—for you, at least,' began Miss Sophia. 'How to break it to you I do not know! Your son—Willie, the naughty, deceitful boy'——

'Hush!' said Dr Peebles, his face growing stern.

'It would be false kindness to "hush," as you say,' said Miss Maria sharply. 'The sooner you know it, the better. Willie has been taken in the act of stealing flowers at Clynes Chase—the gardener caught him, and they have driven in with him to the police-office. We could not believe our eyes.'

'I saw him first,' said Mabel.

For a moment Dr Peebles stood silent. Had all

UNINVITED VISITORS.

three—aunts and niece—gone out of their mind? Then—for he was very quick-witted—light began to break upon him. A peculiar expression came over his face. He stepped back a little, and gravely invited the ladies to enter the dining-room.

'Arthur,' he said in a clear distinct voice, 'there is something here which concerns you as much as me. Will you be so kind,' he continued in a tone of icy politeness, turning to the new-comers, 'as to repeat your statement to the owner of the stolen property, Lord Clynes himself?'

The Misses Perfect stared. There before them stood a tall man, who had just been pushing forward a second chair, on which he was establishing little pale-faced Willie's wounded leg.

'You had better keep it up, my boy,' he was saying. And beside him stood Santa and Beryl, the former clasping the lovely white hyacinth.

'Per—perhaps there has been some—some mistake,' said Miss Sophia.

'But—Newsome ran after him,' said Miss Maria.

'And I saw him,' added Mabel.

Lord Clynes bowed politely. He could not make out what they were talking about.

Dr Peebles repeated what they had said. Willie's face grew red. But suddenly he tugged his father's coat.

'They didn't understand, papa,' he whispered, 'and I daresay it looked very funny. I thought the gardener was mad, or something. It's all right now. I'm sorry if I was rude to you,' he said aloud to Mabel. 'It was only that I was in such a hurry to get the hyacinth they'd forgotten to send here.'

Then the gardener's words returned to the Misses Perfects' minds: 'A flower-pot forgotten —His Lordship's sister.' Dear, dear! The mysterious lady who had taken Mr Rotherby's house—was *she* 'His Lordship's sister,' and these her children? They grew pale and miserable.

'I think we had better go,' said the two elder ladies together.

'You look very tired,' said Santa. 'Won't you have a cup of tea?'

And, indeed, Miss Sophia was nearly fainting.

Those cups of tea were something like coals of fire, but all the same I think they were the beginning of better things. The Misses Perfect —Mabel included—had had a lesson for life.

And the friendship between the two 'next-door houses' grew firmer than ever.

No doubt—at least, I hope so—some of my readers would like to know more about these three children and their friends—how Mr Ross came home after a while, and Mrs Ross grew strong and well, and Lord Clynes settled down at the Chase, and gave up travelling about, except for a few weeks now and then; how Willie learned to understand what a 'mamma' was like, through his love for the kind friend who was almost like an own mother to him; how he grew

up to be a clever and useful man; how Santa became brighter and more energetic, and Beryl more considerate and thoughtful—for all these things did happen—but, as much to my regret as to yours, children, I have no space to tell you more than this short story of a short part of some childish lives.

THE END.

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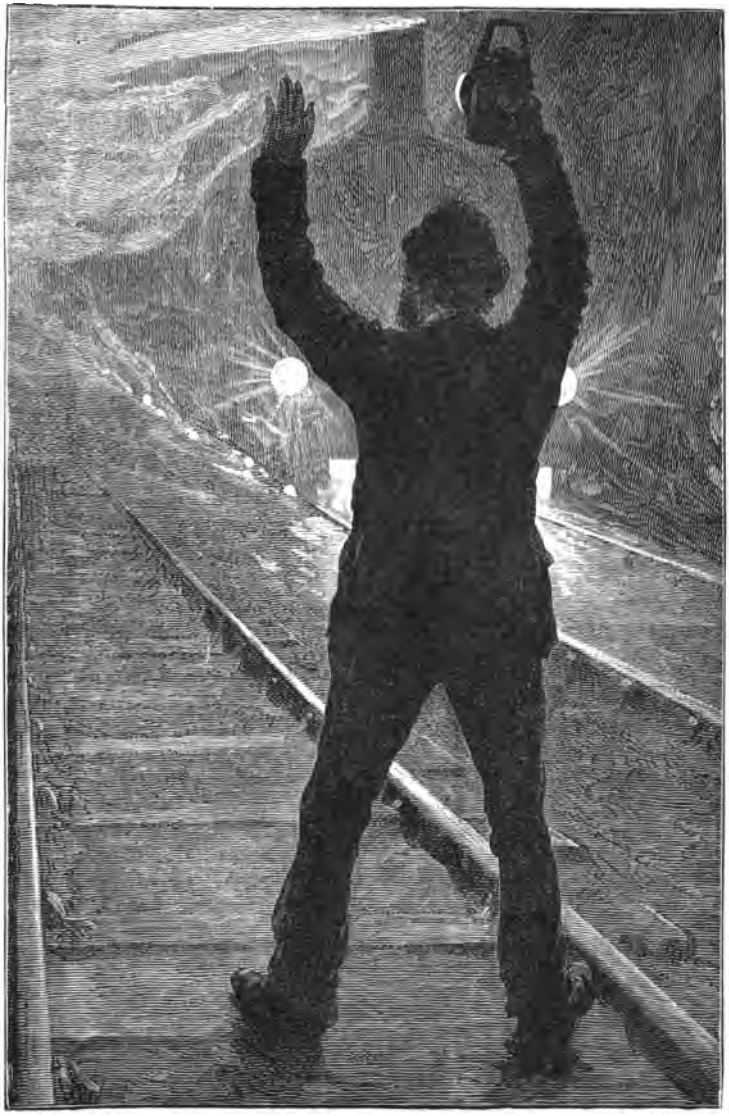

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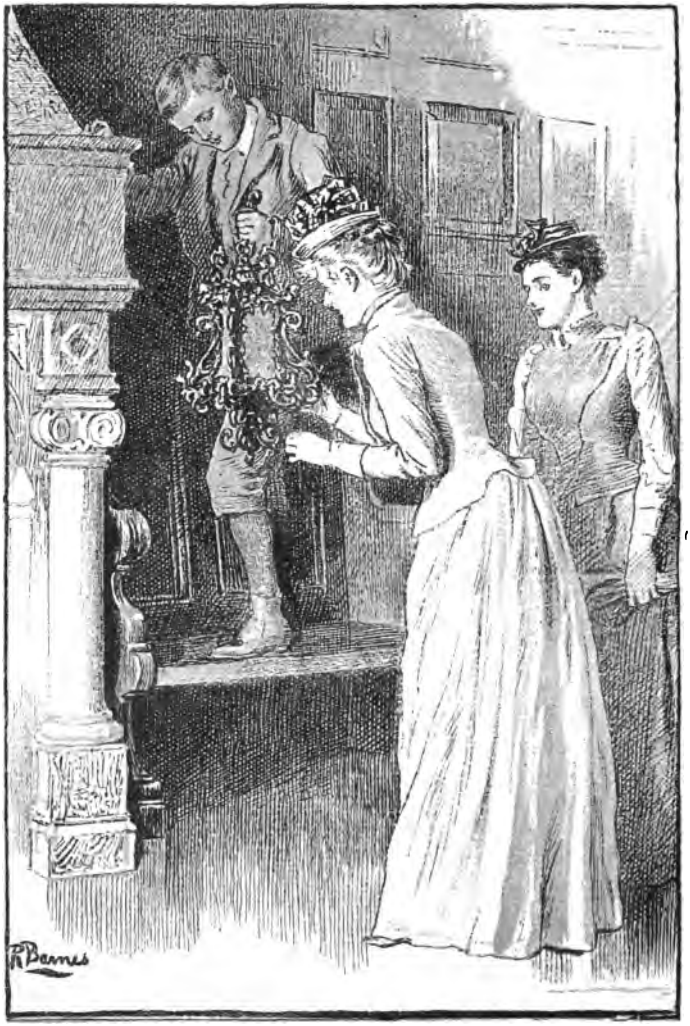

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